

# **Your Best Year Ever**

**Michael Hyatt**

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MICHAEL HYATT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



YOUR

A 5-STEP PLAN FOR

BEST

ACHIEVING YOUR MOST

YEAR

IMPORTANT GOALS

EVER

"A simple program, backed by the best modern research,  
to reach your dreams!"

—TONY ROBBINS



# YOUR BEST YEAR EVER

A 5-STEP PLAN FOR ACHIEVING  
YOUR MOST IMPORTANT GOALS

**MICHAEL HYATT**



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
[www.bakerbooks.com](http://www.bakerbooks.com)

Ebook edition created 2018

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-1-4934-0953-2

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The author is represented by Alive Literary Agency, 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, [www.aliveliterary.com](http://www.aliveliterary.com).

“When it comes to achieving big goals, a lot of the conventional wisdom is flat wrong. In *Your Best Year Ever*, Michael Hyatt lays out a simple program, backed by the best modern research, to reach your dreams!”

—**TONY ROBBINS** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, *Unshakeable*

“Generous goals work (if you write them down) and powerful books work (if you read them). Michael Hyatt has created a fun, fast way to find your dreams and then turn them into reality.”

—**SETH GODIN** author, *Linchpin*

“*Your Best Year Ever* is full of compelling, real-life stories of average people who have achieved extraordinary results. Please take my advice and buy this book only if you want to be able to look back in twelve months and say, ‘Now that was *my* best year ever!’”

—**JOHN C. MAXWELL** author, speaker, and leadership expert

“Let’s be honest . . . resolutions just don’t work. That’s why a lot of gyms are empty and even more budgets are blown by Valentine’s Day every year. If you really want things to change over the next twelve months, look at what *Your Best Year Ever* has to say—then do what it says.”

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“Michael has been a trusted friend and guide of mine for a long time. This is a playbook for success in the relationships, endeavors, and beautiful ambitions you have for yourself and the ones you love the most.”

—**BOB GOFF** *New York Times* bestselling author, *Love Does*

“There are many people who talk about goals, but listen to Michael. He grounds this advice in sound research. A great guide.”

—**DR. HENRY CLOUD** psychologist; *New York Times* bestselling author

“Not only am I having our whole team at FranklinCovey read *Your Best Year Ever*, I am having my three college-age children read it as well. Michael gives us a profound road map for both hope and achievement! This is rare wisdom from an extraordinary leader whom I am grateful to call a friend!”

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“Over the last few years, I’ve referred hundreds of people to Michael Hyatt to help them create their best year ever. Why? His work is based on the best science available, plus the real-world experience of helping more than 25,000 people design

their ideal year. I love that he's distilled the best of his work into this book."

—**JEFF WALKER** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, *Launch*

"For more than a decade, I've known Michael as a successful leader and entrepreneur. Now in *Your Best Year Ever* he shares the simple, proven system he uses to achieve his most important goals. This book can help you achieve even more than you thought possible."

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author, *Visioneering*

"Twenty-five thousand students. Twenty years of insight. Fifteen carefully curated chapters. Five unconventional steps. All in one book that will lead you to your best year ever. What could be more essential than that?"

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"Michael Hyatt has written a smart, evidence-based, and often surprising treatise on how to set the right goals and then see them through to completion. A must-read for anyone looking to take systematic steps toward improving their life."

—**CAL NEWPORT** *New York Times* bestselling author, *Deep Work*

"Michael Hyatt's *Your Best Year Ever* is the best resource on goal setting I've read. It also helps you emphasize your core purpose, which is important because purpose-driven goals are much more likely to be achieved. Get this book. It will show you how to turn your goals into reality."

—**JON GORDON** *New York Times* bestselling author, *The Energy Bus*

"We all want good things: a rewarding marriage, business, family, spiritual life. Getting them is another story. Thankfully, Michael Hyatt shares what works not only for him, but for the tens of thousands of his *Best Year Ever* students. I've used this system for years for one simple reason: it's the best available."

—**DONALD MILLER** *New York Times* bestselling author; founder and  
CEO, StoryBrand

"Michael Hyatt has a knack for making the complex simple. Even better, he makes it useful. Nothing exemplifies that better than *Your Best Year Ever*. Anyone can put these five steps to work in their own lives today."

—**DAN SULLIVAN** president, The Strategic Coach Inc.

"I am a Michael Hyatt follower. I have lived out as much of what he teaches as possible. I have paid off all of my debt, written books that would have never been published without his inspiration, and taken his advice in many other areas of my life. Now you can do it too. The price of *Your Best Year Ever* is extremely cheap for the *best advice ever*."

—**STEPHEN ARTERBURN** *New York Times* bestselling author; founder,  
New Life

"The best part of this book is that before he wrote it, Michael spent decades living it. This is Michael Jordan writing a book about basketball."

—**JON ACUFF** author, *Finish: Give Yourself the Gift of Done*

"As a student of Michael's *Best Year Ever* program, I can honestly say that following this process has led to my most successful and fulfilling year ever."

—**PAT FLYNN** author, *Will It Fly?*; host, *Smart Passive Income* podcast

“Hands down, the best goal-setting program I have ever seen.”

—**JEFF GOINS** bestselling author, *The Art of Work* and *Real Artists Don't Starve*

“Say goodbye to #goalfailure once you learn Michael Hyatt's *Best Year Ever* goal-setting system. His teaching is rooted in the best science available, and the proof is in the gritty, real-life stories of average people who have achieved extraordinary results.”

—**AMY PORTERFIELD** host, *The Online Marketing Made Easy* podcast

“Helps you build a very solid framework for setting better goals and then achieving them. You'll benefit from his research and the great ideas he's synthesized here for your success. Dig in!”

—**CHRIS BROGAN** *New York Times* bestselling author, *It's Not About the Tights*

“Many people equate goal setting with the old cliché ‘Fake it till you make it.’ *Your Best Year Ever* replaces any pretense or phoniness with a step-by-step process of simply speaking the truth in advance.”

—**DAN MILLER** *New York Times* bestselling author, *48 Days to the Work You Love*

“Equal parts Albert Einstein, Mark Twain, and Jack Welch, this book will be the ‘Goals Standard’ for the next fifty years.”

—**ANDY ANDREWS** *New York Times* bestselling author, *The Traveler's Gift* and *The Noticer*

“Great lives don't just happen. To a large degree, they're the result of achieving meaningful goals. *Your Best Year Ever* by Michael Hyatt is a crash course on going from dream to reality in just five steps.”

—**LEWIS HOWES** entrepreneur; *New York Times* bestselling author, *The School of Greatness*

“*Your Best Year Ever* is in a league of its own. I love the complementary science that supports the concepts, and I love how the action steps leave no stone unturned.”

—**SHAWN STEVENSON** international bestselling author, *Sleep Smarter*

“*Your Best Year Ever* is a must-read for business people, athletes, parents, students, teachers, public officials, volunteers, or anyone else who wants to have greater influence and impact and a more effective personal and professional life.”

—**TIM TASSOPOULOS** president and CEO, Chick-fil-A, Inc.

“Michael Hyatt is a master of intentional living. In this book he takes his rich personal experience, couples it with substantial science and research, and delivers concentrated insights as actionable steps that make it possible for anyone to have their best year ever. Read it and achieve.”

—**RORY VADEN** cofounder, Southwestern Consulting; *New York Times* bestselling author, *Take the Stairs*

“People who have great success and hit their goals have a strategic game plan. In



*Your Best Year Ever*, Michael Hyatt coaches you in crafting a master plan to multiply your success and create the life and business of your dreams.”

—**DR. JOSH AXE** founder, DrAxe.com; author, *Eat Dirt*; CVO, Ancient Nutrition Company

“If you’ve ever set goals and failed to achieve them, it’s probably not your fault. Why? Traditional goal setting is a recipe for failure and discouragement. Thankfully Michael Hyatt offers an untraditional approach—one based on exhaustive research and field testing. Here’s an approach that works!”

—**IAN MORGAN CRON** author, *The Road Back to You*

“The only goal-setting program that created significant, lasting change in my life. As of this writing, this system has helped me lose 67 pounds and pay off more than \$400,000 in debt, and has enabled my business to break the million-dollar revenue barrier. This just flat-out works.”

—**RAY EDWARDS** host, *The Ray Edwards Show*; founder, Ray Edwards International

“Say goodbye to broken resolutions and yes to massive progress. Michael has done a magical job of breaking down the latest goal-setting research into a practical guide for achieving more. This is a book I will reread every year.”

—**STU MCLAREN** founder, the *Tribe* course

“Michael sidesteps the usual productivity guidance and provides current research and life-changing stories on principles and approaches to actually setting and achieving your goals. I’ve seen him live this in public and private with those he works with, so I trust no one more on this topic.”

—**ERIK FISHER** host, *Beyond the To-Do List* podcast

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# Your Best Is Yet to Come

Heather Kampf is a highly decorated runner with an impressive string of accomplishments, including three USA championships for the road mile. But what's most impressive was the time she won first place in the 600-meter final at the 2008 Big Ten Indoor Track Championship after falling flat on her face. For the 600-meter dash, runners make three laps around a 200-meter course. As the third and final lap approached, Kampf was in second place and ready to take first. Then in a split second everything changed.

"I was making a move to pass . . . and probably just didn't account for enough space for my long stride," she recalled. "I felt my heel get clipped once, and then on the second time I knew I was going down."<sup>1</sup> More than going down, Kampf went sprawling. She skidded along the ground, her face bouncing on the red track as her momentum tossed her legs up behind her. Spectators gasped. It was a hard fall that instantly knocked her to the rear of the pack with virtually no hope of catching up.

When it comes to achieving our goals, I know a lot of us feel like that. We start out strong and make huge strides, gathering momentum as we go. Then we get derailed or fall short of our hopes. Not always—but often enough that most of us can point to a handful of setbacks or failures with disappointment and regret.

Nothing symbolizes this kind of frustration like New Year's resolutions. People have been making them since forever. Some make them every year, and most of us have made them in the past—six in ten Americans set resolutions at least some years.<sup>2</sup> But just because something is popular doesn't mean it works.

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## A Faulty System

Hashtags like #resolutionfail start trending on social media hours into the new year. "Got ready for the gym, packed my gear and went for a burger instead #resolutionfail," a woman joked on January 3. "Bought my twin sister workout clothes for our birthday and we have yet to lift anything but a fork," said another the next day.<sup>3</sup>

I bet most can identify. We can usually stick it out a few weeks. But

fewer than half are still going after six months. Less than 10 percent are ultimately successful.<sup>4</sup> In fact, many of us stop making resolutions because we've failed at them in the past. Welcome to the club. We're like hatchling turtles, bursting with determination to make it over the dunes to the ocean beyond. Then the seagulls swoop in and start picking us off one by one. Some industries bank on our failure. Fitness centers sell yearlong contracts knowing the majority of customers won't come more than a few weeks. NPR covered one chain with 6,500 members per location and only room for 300 at a time.<sup>5</sup> Gyms can afford to oversell their capacity because they know we'll get distracted or discouraged and lose interest. How does it feel knowing people assume we'll fail—and then benefit when we do?

This is about more than funny tweets and sad statistics. Let's be honest. At whatever point in time we determine to make a change and improve one or more areas of our life, our goals reflect many of our most important desires and aspirations. Consider some common resolutions people set:

- Lose weight, eat healthier
- Be a better person
- Spend less, save more
- Deepen relationship with God
- Spend more time with family/friends
- Exercise more often
- Learn something new
- Do more good deeds for others
- Find the love of my life
- Find a better job<sup>6</sup>

Generally, we're talking about our health, wealth, relationships, and personal development. I get that. My governing assumption in this book is that you're an educated high achiever who wants to grow personally, professionally, relationally, intellectually, and spiritually. And that's important because when people like you reach their full potential, the world has more happy marriages, kids have their moms and dads at night, businesses have leaders worth admiring and emulating, and you have the health and vitality necessary to fuel your dreams. One intentional choice at a time, you make the world around you better.

And that's exactly why we need a far better plan. Dreams like these are too important to entrust to a faulty system.

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# A Far Better Plan

Some people say the best way to achieve our goals is to set just one or two. But for me that's leaving too much on the table—probably for you too. Whether you're an entrepreneur, executive, lawyer, salesperson, designer, marketer, doctor, coach, mom or dad, husband or wife, or several of those things, we're discussing the stuff that matters most, right? So why leave so many hopes unfulfilled? Instead of scaling back, we just need a system geared to work.

I've been studying personal development and professional achievement for decades. And I've been practicing both at home and at work. As the former CEO of a \$250 million corporation and now the founder and CEO of a high-growth leadership development firm, I utilize a proven goal-setting system that incorporates safeguards for many of the pitfalls and failings of typical goals and resolutions.

Over the years I've seen amazing results in my own life and the lives of countless people with whom I've shared it. I lead thousands through this process every year in one-on-one coaching, group workshops, and a successful online course called *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever*<sup>TM</sup>. Not to mention the millions who read my blog and stream my podcast.



“One intentional  
choice at a  
time, you make  
the world  
around you  
better.”

This book comes out of all that learning, living, and teaching. Based on decades of practical experience and the best current research on goal attainment and human achievement, this program is designed to help you find the clarity, develop the courage, and leverage the

commitment you need to accomplish your most important personal and professional goals.

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## Your Breakthrough Year

When Heather Kampf hit the ground, she could have stayed down. She could have easily become discouraged and admitted what everyone was already thinking—that her race was over. “It was as if a vacuum had sucked all the energy out of the place,” she said of the moment she collapsed. One of the announcers even tried softening the blow. Since Kampf’s teammate had moved into the lead, he said, it might be okay if she came in last.

But she didn’t.

“The first thing I remember seeing after feeling like I was falling was seeing my hands on the track when I was pushing off to go again,” Kampf said. She leapt up as fast as she fell down and began closing the distance. The crowd responded. “As I started to gain momentum, it was like a crescendo of noise and excitement,” she remembered.<sup>7</sup> To the amazement of the announcers and spectators, she passed one runner, then another, then finally her own teammate to take *first* place!

Kampf’s story provides a powerful picture of what can happen when we stay in the game and keep pushing. Maybe you feel a few steps behind. Maybe you’re at the rear of the pack and can’t see how you might regain lost ground and reach your goals. *Hold that thought.*

For the moment, I want you to consider instead what a truly breakthrough year might look like for you. Imagine it’s twelve months from now, and you’ve accomplished your top goals in all of life’s domains. Think about your health. How does it feel to be in the best shape of your life? How does it feel to have the stamina to play for hours with your kids, pursue your favorite hobbies, and have energy to spare?

Are you married? What’s it like to have deepened and enriched your most significant relationship, one where you can’t wait to spend time together? Imagine your life full of intimacy, joy, and friendship with someone who shares your most important priorities, your most significant goals, and gives the encouragement and support you’ve dreamt about for so long.

Consider your finances. How does it feel to be debt-free, to have money left over at the end of the month? Imagine having the resources you need to meet your expenses, protect yourself against the unexpected, and invest for the future. Think how reassuring it is to



have deep savings and how satisfying it is to provide your family with the life they desire and deserve.

Reflect for a moment on your spiritual life. Imagine you have an abiding sense of something transcendent in your life, of a connection to a larger purpose and a bigger story. Imagine waking up grateful and going to bed satisfied. How does it feel to face life's ups and downs with peace in the deepest part of your soul?

Imagining these possibilities can be difficult for some. Life can feel chaotic and uncertain, and disbelief is one way to brace ourselves for the worst. But I think the reason goes even deeper. Most of us have a long history of not getting what we want out of life. Perhaps we set some big goals we didn't achieve, or the future turned out differently than we planned. Life throws curveballs. We've all been there. Disappointment turns to frustration, to anger, to sadness, and finally twists itself into cynicism. You might feel it rearing its head right now.

Stick with me. Whatever has happened in your past—good or bad—it is truly possible to make this your best year ever, even in those areas where you've suffered serious setbacks. I'm going to show you how. Consider this book an invitation to make the next twelve months the most meaningful and significant you've experienced in your life so far.

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## What's Your LifeScore?

*Your Best Year Ever* is based on five key assumptions. First, *real life is multifaceted*. Our lives are more than our work. They are even more than our families. The way I see it, our lives consist of ten interrelated domains:

1. Spiritual: Your connection to God
2. Intellectual: Your engagement with significant ideas
3. Emotional: Your psychological health
4. Physical: Your bodily health
5. Marital: Your spouse or significant other
6. Parental: Your children if you have any
7. Social: Your friends and associates
8. Vocational: Your profession
9. Avocational: Your hobbies and pastime
10. Financial: Your personal or family finances

Second, *every domain matters*. Why? Because each one affects all the

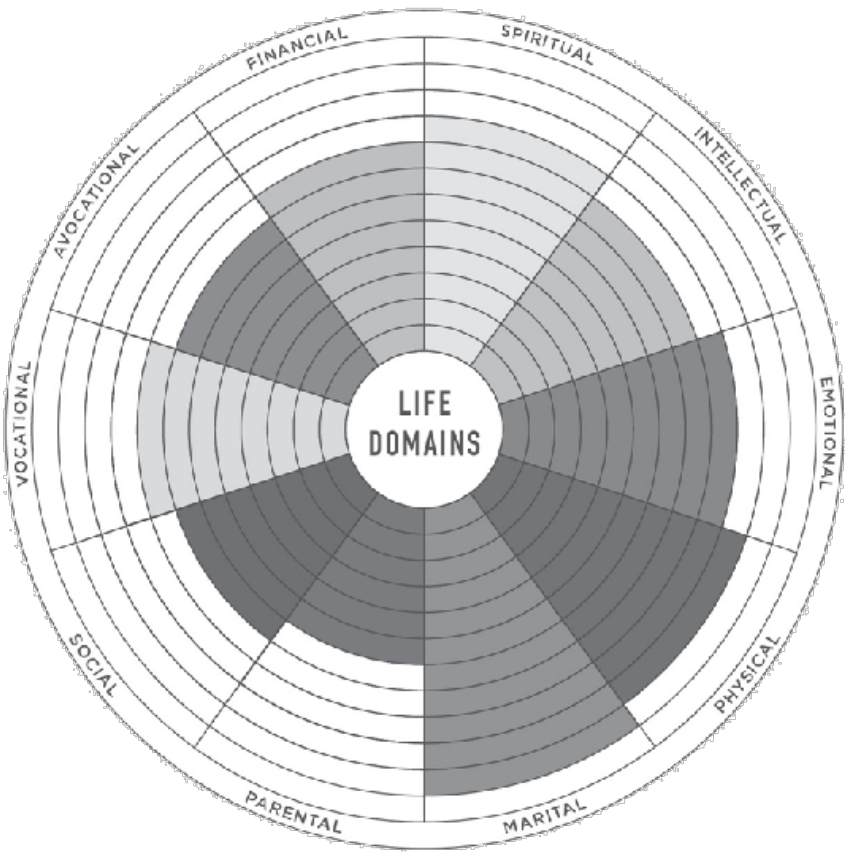
others. For example, your physical condition impacts your work. And stress at work impacts life at home. All this interplay means you've got to give each domain the appropriate attention if you want to experience progress in life.

Third, *progress starts only when you get clear on where you are right now*. Maybe you have a vague sense things are off track in your career but haven't come to grips with the truth of your situation. Or maybe you sense your marriage has become dead or routine, but you haven't had the courage to just admit you're stuck.

Fourth, *you can improve any life domain*. No matter what's going on in the world or how off track and frustrated you feel, you don't have to settle for what is. Progress and significant personal growth are truly possible.

And that takes me to the fifth and final assumption: *confidence, happiness, and life satisfaction are byproducts of personal growth*. One of the best ways to overcome all the uncertainty we experience in the world and make progress on your most important goals is to become fully aware of how much agency and control you actually have. It's far more than you think.

To get a sense of where you are right now, I encourage you to take a quick and easy online quiz called the LifeScore Assessment. You can intentionally engineer massive growth over the next year in the most important domains of life. But you need a baseline on where you are now so you can identify which domains need the most attention. Maybe you're succeeding at work but your health is suffering. Or maybe you're doing a great job connecting at home but don't have an actionable plan to build your savings for an emergency.



Life consists of ten interrelated domains. Understanding the relative health of each can help you make progress across them all. The gradations represent relative health in each of the ten life domains.

I designed the LifeScore Assessment to help you quickly spot areas of improvement and measure your personal growth over time. If you haven't taken it yet, point your web browser to [BestYearEver.me/lifescore](https://BestYearEver.me/lifescore) and get your score. It's fast and easy. The whole process takes just ten minutes. Best of all, it will give you the insight you need to begin your best year ever. But that's just the start.

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## The Path Ahead

Let me give you an overview of where we're going. I've divided my goal-achievement process into five simple steps. In Step 1, I'm going to help you overcome any doubts you might harbor about

experiencing your best year ever. Unless we believe we can reach our goals, we're sure to miss. This step will help you shed limiting beliefs and imagine what a breakthrough year might mean for your life.

For Step 2, I'm going to talk to you about getting closure on the past. Dragging the worst of the past into the best of the future is another reason our goals fail. If we get closure on the past, especially those efforts that went unnoticed and unrewarded, we're able to more confidently step into the future. I'm not talking about digging deep into your childhood, just the last few years. I'll give you a four-stage system to analyze what worked and what didn't so you can move forward with the wisdom and insight you need to design the year to come. I'll even show you how some of your biggest frustrations in the last year point to your greatest opportunities in the next.

Then in Step 3, I'm going to give you a seven-part framework for setting goals that really work. This is where you watch your dreams come to life as you cast your vision for the months ahead. Part of the problem with typical goals and resolutions is that they're poorly designed. "Exercise more often" or "spend less, save more" fail on several counts. Among other things, effective goals are specific and measurable. Goals poorly formulated are goals easily forgotten. This proven framework, on the other hand, will give you a portfolio of meaningful, effective goals.



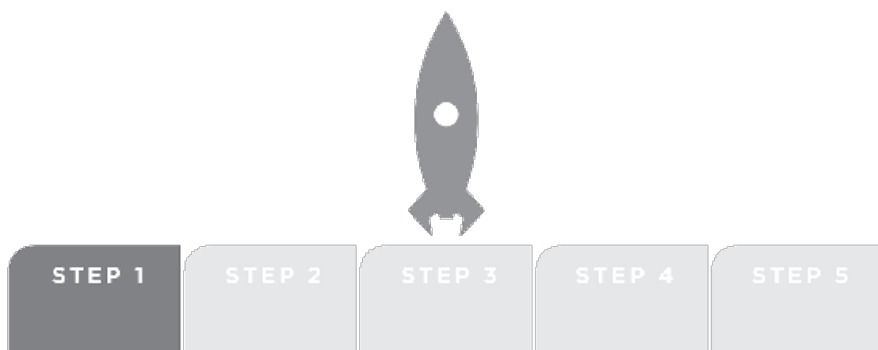
“Goals poorly  
formulated are  
goals easily  
forgotten.”

Another major reason goals fail is that we're not motivated enough to attain them. Without a compelling reason to persist, we lose interest, get distracted, or forget what we purposed to do. In Step 4, I'm going to introduce you to the most powerful motivator I know:

your why. Once you nail this piece, you'll be unstoppable—even when the going gets tough and obstacles appear in your path. I'll also show you a foolproof trick for staying motivated while cultivating beneficial new habits.

Finally, in Step 5 we're going to put all the pieces together and empower you to take action with the three best tactics I know for accomplishing the goals you've set. Most goals fail because we're missing proven implementation tactics. Winning a battle takes both strategy and tactics. But unless someone shows us what works best for attaining our goals, we're left to good luck or hard knocks to figure it out on our own. This step will help you flatten the learning curve. This is where you'll learn the power of low-bar next-action steps, Activation Triggers™, and regular goal review for beating the hurdles that get in your way.

Is this next year just going to be another year, not that different from the rest, or are you going to make this your breakthrough year? You don't have to spend one more year discouraged or disappointed you're not making the progress you want. If you want to go from frustrated and confused to clear, confident, and empowered to achieve your best year ever, I'm convinced *Your Best Year Ever* has the answers you're looking for. Let's dive in.



## Believe the Possibility

There's an old saying: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes." That's especially true when we're thinking of our personal histories. Why? The circumstances of our lives change week by week, year by year. But we're still us. And our habits of thinking tend to produce consistent results no matter what's going on in our work, our relationships, or the world around us.

If our habits of thinking are beneficial, we tend to experience positive results, such as happiness, personal satisfaction, even material success. If our habits of thinking are counterproductive, however, we often experience the opposite: unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and the nagging feeling that the deck is somehow stacked against us.

The good news is that you can change the rhyme scheme. Even if your habits of thinking are already serving you well, you can experience transformative personal improvement in all areas of your life by upgrading your beliefs. When we focus on belief improvement, often our circumstances follow suit.

# Your Beliefs Shape Your Reality

What happens is of little significance compared with the stories we tell ourselves about what happens.

RABIH ALAMEDDINE, *The Hakawati*

Several years ago my wife, Gail, and I had an English setter named Nelson. He was gentle, patient, and great with the grandkids. He had only one fault. Whenever the front door would open, he bolted like a prison escapee. It could take twenty minutes to chase him down and bring him home. The scariest thing was watching him narrowly escape an oncoming car. We didn't know what to do. Until we discovered Invisible Fence.

It was the breakthrough we needed. It works by pairing an underground perimeter wire to an electronic collar. If Nelson approached the boundary, his collar delivered a warning vibration to stay back. With some additional training, he quickly learned where the line was and avoided it. No more bolting out the door. We could actually leave him in the yard without fear he would run away.

But here's what's interesting. After a while we realized the collar was no longer necessary. If we stood on the other side of the barrier and called, he wouldn't come. If the kids tried to entice him with a treat, he wouldn't budge. The barrier had moved from the external world of an electronic device to the internal world of Nelson's head.

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## The Power of Beliefs

Our beliefs play a massive part in how we approach life. We tend to experience what we expect. We've known this for a long time. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," said sociologist William I. Thomas in 1928. Reflecting on "the Thomas theorem" twenty years later, sociologist Robert K. Merton coined the



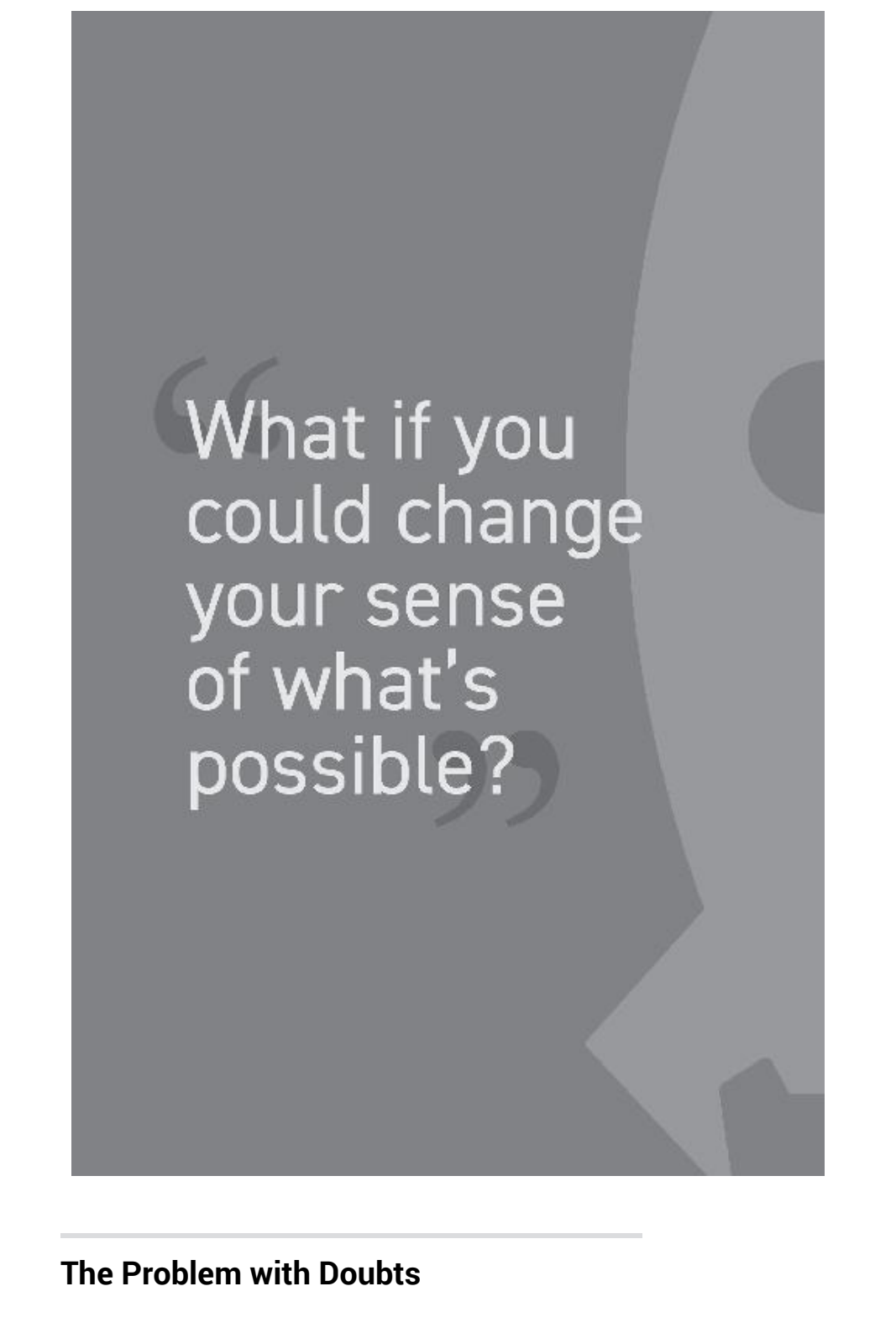
phrase “self-fulfilling prophecy.” And in 1957 philosopher Karl Popper labeled it the “Oedipus Effect,” after the mythic hero whose life fulfilled a tragic prophecy.<sup>1</sup>

As science writer Chris Berdik said in his book *Mind Over Mind*, “Our real world is in many ways an expected world. What we see, hear, taste, feel, and experience is produced from the top down as much as it is from the bottom up. Our minds organize chaos. We fill in blanks with well-learned forms, patterns, and assumptions. Our predictions for the near and distant future bend reality.”<sup>2</sup> How?

It’s not fantasy. Nor is it related to any supposed law of attraction, as some might think. It’s actually far simpler than that. Because our expectations shape what we believe is possible, they shape our perceptions and actions. That means they also shape the outcomes. And that means they shape our reality.

Remember the old Tiger Woods? The pre-meltdown Woods who burnt up the record books year after year? Some of his clutch shots are legendary. At the 2003 Presidents Cup in South Africa, for example, he sunk a fifteen-foot putt in the near dark. It seemed like an impossible shot. Everyone thought so—but not Woods. Listen to what his teammate Mike Weir said about that shot: “He knew he was going to make it. . . . That’s probably what separated him more than anything else: his belief.”<sup>3</sup> Do you hear what Weir is saying? Many other golfers had the skill to make those shots. But they lacked the belief they could pull it off.

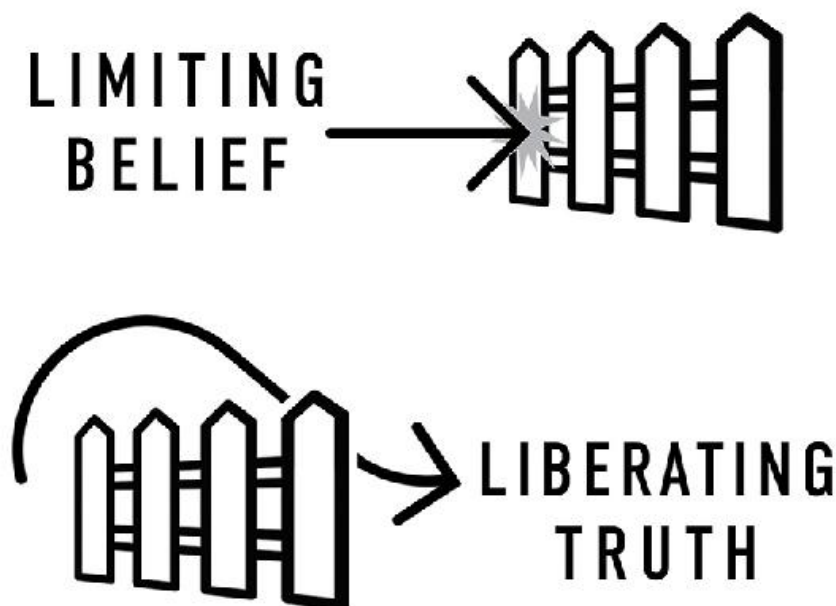
That’s true for a lot of us.



“What if you  
could change  
your sense  
of what's  
possible?”

One of the biggest reasons we don't succeed with our goals is we doubt we can. We believe they're out of reach. Polls show the percentage of people in their twenties who achieve their New Year's resolutions is far greater than those over fifty.<sup>4</sup> In fact, while eight in ten millennials set resolutions, almost seven in ten adults over sixty-five say setting resolutions is "a waste of time," according to a Harris Poll.<sup>5</sup> Why? It's sad, but the greater the number of setbacks we've experienced in life, the less likely we are to believe we can prevail. Doubt is a goal toxin.

As I said earlier, most of us have a long history of not getting what we want out of life. To shield ourselves from future disappointment, we develop a cynical, self-protective attitude toward life. We're like Nelson. We've tried to step out in the past and been zapped—or far worse. Maybe it was only once. Or maybe it was several times. Regardless, now we stand still even when there is no actual barrier. The one in our heads is strong enough to keep us stuck.



We all face obstacles. While limiting beliefs prevent us from overcoming them, liberating truths help us transcend obstacles and improve our circumstances.

You know what this looks like. You say, "I need to apply for that new job." But then you think, "There's no way. I don't have enough experience or enough education." Suddenly, an idea that might take you to the next chapter of your story just withers and dies. Or maybe a friend says, "Hey, you and Bill should go to that marriage retreat

this weekend.” And you think, “Are you kidding me? I can’t get him off the couch for an evening, let alone a whole weekend.” Or somebody says, “I think it would be awesome to run a 5K.” And you think, “Maybe I should.” But then the cynicism sets in. “I’m forty pounds overweight,” you think. “I’ve got a bum knee. There’s no way I could possibly run a 5K.”

It’s hard to get your hopes dashed if you never get them up to begin with. But that kind of cynicism poisons our souls and sabotages our results. Our beliefs about what’s possible have a direct impact on the reality we experience. But what if you could change your sense of what’s possible?

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## A Different Frame

Triple-A baseball pitcher Steve Mura was starting one night in an away game, but he almost lost before leaving the dugout. Why? “I can never win on this mound,” he told his pitching coach, Harvey Dorfman. Dorfman didn’t buy that for a second. But he could see Mura was already preparing to lose. So Dorfman pushed Mura to explain his belief. The pitcher said the angle of the mound was wrong. And for Mura, that settled it. But not for his coach. It was just a jumping-off point.

Dorfman asked what kind of adjustments he could make. Sounds simple, I know. But it was like a switch. That one suggestion created a new sense of possibility. Before the game, Mura came up with a new strategy to deal with the unfriendly slope of the mound. “There is a difference,” Dorfman told Mura, “between, ‘I have not won’ and ‘I cannot win. . . .’” The past didn’t determine the future—unless Mura’s belief led him to act like it did. “You don’t think about strategies when you think that outcome is inevitable,” said Dorfman. But by changing his belief, Mura was able to change his strategy and the outcome. He pitched an almost-perfect game that night—just two hits and no runs.<sup>6</sup>

Mura faced a major challenge. But like Nelson, it was in his mind, not on the field. I find that’s true for almost all areas of life. “Many of the circumstances that seem to block us in our daily lives may only appear to do so based on a framework of assumptions we carry with us,” say Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander. “Draw a different frame around the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view.”<sup>7</sup>

History’s full of similar stories. Pilots once thought it was impossible to fly faster than 768 miles an hour (the speed of sound at sea level). But Chuck Yeager figured he could do it and officially broke the sound

barrier on October 14, 1947. Planes have only advanced since then, and pilots regularly fly two, four, even six times the speed of sound.

Before 1954, runners assumed it was impossible to run a mile in less than four minutes. Then Roger Bannister ran it in three minutes, fifty-nine seconds and change—a record that has since been beaten by other runners.

People have dreamt about human-powered flight for millennia. But then in 1977 someone developed an engineless plane capable of sustained, controlled flight. That was just the start. In 1988, Greek cycling champion Kanellos Kanellopoulos flew more than seventy miles over open sea all by pedal power.<sup>8</sup> And he's not the only one. Building and flying people-powered aircraft is a weekend hobby for some nowadays.

Here's another example. In the middle 1980s, skateboarder Mike McGill did the first ever 540-degree aerial turn in his sport. That's a full rotation and a half. No one thought it could be done, but once McGill finally did the "McTwist," others began doing it too, pushing it further still. Tony Hawk did the first-ever 720-degree turn. And then in 2012 Tom Schaar—at just twelve years old—did the first-ever 1080. That's three full rotations in the air! As Schaar told ESPN, "It was the hardest trick I've ever done, but"—and get this—"it was easier than I thought."<sup>9</sup>

"Whatever you think can't be done, somebody will come along and do it," jazz pianist Thelonious Monk said.<sup>10</sup> The impossible only seems so on the front end. Yeager, Bannister, Kanellopoulos, McGill, and Hawk showed the rest of us that more than we previously believed was attainable. Will you be the next Schaar and take it even further?

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## A Failure of Imagination

The first key difference between an unmet goal and personal success is the belief that it can be achieved. Listen to what famed futurist, sci-fi author, and inventor Arthur C. Clarke said: "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong." As Clarke said, it's a "failure of imagination."<sup>11</sup>

And it's not just scientists. That failure of imagination affects athletes, parents, leaders, managers, teachers, and the rest of us to one degree or another. The good news is that it doesn't have to. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to look at life. One leads directly to this failure of imagination. But the other can revive and amplify our sense of possibility. We'll look at the difference next.

## Some Beliefs Hold You Back

How little we see! What we do see depends mainly on what we look for.

SIR JOHN LUBBOCK, *The Beauties of Nature*

I once had a client whom I'll call Charlie. That's not his real name. Let's just say I've changed his identity to protect the guilty. Charlie derived significance from feeling wronged, put upon, and persecuted. He griped about everything. Everyone was an idiot but him. Nobody could do anything right. Life was rigged. If we went to lunch, which I dreaded, he never picked up the check—even if he called the meeting. I always left his presence drained and diminished.

And it wasn't just me. Charlie was that way with everyone. His employees and friends rolled their eyes when I mentioned his name. He approached every relationship with a hoarding mentality. People around him lived in constant fear that their livelihood and well-being were at risk. And guess what? The success he craved always seemed out of reach.

Charlie exemplifies what I call *scarcity thinking*.

Now, compare Charlie with another friend of mine. Robert is one of the most generous people I know. He always greets me with a big smile, a hug, and an encouraging word. I always leave his presence energized, feeling great about being me. And he's like this with everyone. He treats employees, vendors, booking agents, publishers, and everyone else as if they were his best customers. He routinely invests in their success, and it comes back to him in a thousand ways. Robert exemplifies what I call *abundance thinking*.

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### Scarcity vs. Abundance

To accomplish anything, we have to believe we're up to the challenge. That doesn't mean it will be easy or that we even know how we're

going to accomplish it. Usually we don't know. It just means we believe we're capable; we have what it takes to prevail. Why is that important? Because every goal has obstacles. When some people have trouble getting over those obstacles, they doubt they have what it takes. Think Charlie. But others are confident they'll prevail if they just work harder or come at the problem from a different direction. Think Robert.

Researchers label the first group *entity theorists*. They think their abilities are set in stone. You've heard people say this: "I'm just not good at x, y, or z." These are the scarcity thinkers. Researchers call the second group *incremental theorists*. When they struggle with an obstacle, they just look for new approaches to the problem. They know there's a workaround or a solution if they just keep working at it. These are the abundance thinkers.<sup>1</sup>

Of these two habits of thinking, one leads to failure, fear, and discontent. The other leads to success, joy, and fulfillment. The main difference? Scarcity thinkers like Charlie operate from a web of limiting beliefs about the world, other people, and themselves, whereas abundance thinkers like Robert operate from a platform of liberating truths.

#### SCARCITY THINKERS

1. Are entitled and fearful
2. Believe there is always more to be had
3. Are stingy with their knowledge, contacts, and compassion
4. Assume they are the way they are
5. Default to the scarcity mindset and don't develop
6. Default to competition, believing it makes the pie smaller and them weaker
7. Are pessimistic about the future, believing that tough times are ahead
8. See challenges as obstacles
9. Think big and take big risks

#### ABUNDANCE THINKERS

So what's your mindset? Achieving our goals starts by understanding the distinction between limiting beliefs and liberating truths.

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## Three Kinds of Limiting Beliefs

It's easy to spot limiting beliefs in our own thinking if we're attentive. Start with assumptions we hold about the world. "I can't start a new business right now; the market is terrible," somebody might say. Or, "I

don't trust management; they're always trying to cheat us." Or, "Those politicians are going to deep-six the economy and make it impossible for me to get ahead." These can be very deep-seated beliefs. But they're not always reality, and they're rarely the whole truth even when they seem accurate. We've got to learn to question and even dismiss them or they will limit our freedom and motivation to act.

We also have limiting beliefs about others. "It's no use asking," you might say. "He's too busy to meet with me." Or, "Hey, she's just a bean counter. What can she possibly know?" Or, "He hasn't responded yet. I guess he must be upset with me." Or, "Someone like her would never go out with a person like me." These aren't truths necessarily. They're just beliefs we let influence us.

## 3 KINDS OF LIMITING BELIEFS



ABOUT THE WORLD



ABOUT OTHERS



ABOUT OURSELVES

Watch out: limiting beliefs distort our view of the world, others, even ourselves.

The third type of limiting belief is where it really hits home for most of us. I'm talking about beliefs about ourselves. We might say, "I'm a quitter. I never finish what I start." Or, "I can't help it. I've never been physically fit." Or, "I've always been terrible with money." Or, "I'm just not the creative type." These beliefs are often false, half-truths at best. And they will roadblock any progress you want to make in life.

How do you know if you're falling into the trap of limiting beliefs? In his book *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*, Jeremy Dean mentions three dead giveaways:

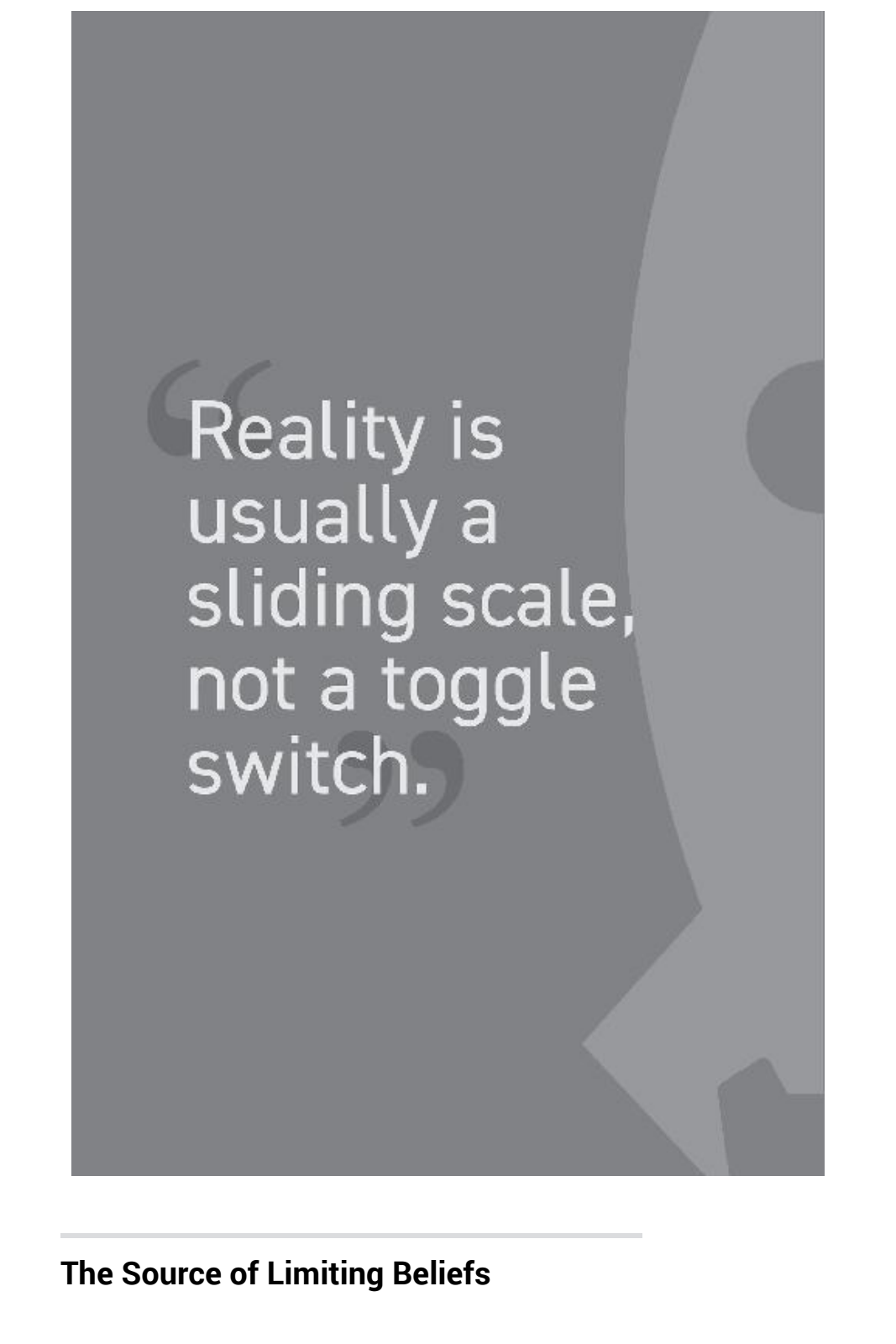
- *Black-and-white thinking.* That's when we assume we've failed if we don't achieve perfection. Reality is usually a sliding scale, not a toggle switch.
- *Personalizing.* That's when we blame ourselves for random negative occurrences.
- *Catastrophizing.* That's when we assume the worst even with little evidence.<sup>2</sup>



To that list we can add a fourth:

- *Universalizing*. That's when we take a bad experience and assume it's true across the board.

Where do these beliefs come from?



“Reality is usually a sliding scale, not a toggle switch.”

Some of our limiting beliefs, as I've said, come from previous failures or setbacks. Repeated setbacks can train us to assume the worst. They can condition us to hoard what we have and avoid risks.

But if we're observant we can spot other influences. The news media, for instance, has a strong negativity bias. As J. R. R. Tolkien quipped, it's mostly murders and football scores.<sup>3</sup> "Studies have shown that an overabundance of news can make you depressed, anxious, and, for the most part, doesn't usually provide you with the ability to actually change or influence anything being reported," says Michael Grothaus—and he's a professional journalist.<sup>4</sup> Tune in, and it's easy to believe the world is getting worse and worse—more crime, more poverty, more violence than ever. It's like a long litany of worry and fear, interrupted by commercials about scary medical conditions. News organizations are predisposed to show you negative news because fear triggers the more primitive parts of our brains and keeps our eyes glued to the threat. To make matters worse, their industry is in decline. So the media increasingly appeal to fear in order to deliver eyeballs to their advertisers.

Then there's social media, which can mirror this negativity bias. After our most recent election cycle, it seemed like a never-ending stream of negativity. But you can also detect a positivity bias at work.

Check Facebook, and it can seem like everyone's leading a charmed life. Happy kids, beautiful friends, gorgeous vacations, fulfilling work. We're instantly, usually subconsciously, aware we're not measuring up. We're not as smart, creative, educated, successful, lucky, athletic, or artistic as everyone on Instagram. Scholar Donna Freitas conducted a large-scale study of social media and students on more than a dozen college campuses. "Facebook is the CNN of envy, a kind of 24/7 news cycle of who's cool, who's not, who's up, and who's down," she writes in *The Happiness Effect*, a book that reports her findings. "Unless you have rock-solid self-esteem, are impervious to jealousy, or have an extraordinarily rational capacity to remind yourself exactly what everyone is doing when they post their glories on social media [that is, positioning and bragging], it's difficult not to care."<sup>5</sup> I'm a huge advocate of social media, but it's no wonder that time on Facebook is predictive of feeling crummy about our lives.<sup>6</sup>

And then there are negative relationships, everyone from friends and coworkers to our family or faith community. We often pick up these beliefs in childhood. They become part of what University of Virginia psychology professor Timothy D. Wilson calls our "core narratives" about life.<sup>7</sup> Many of these core narratives are good and helpful. But some are not, and they can be hard to let go of and disruptive when we try. Other times we pick up limiting beliefs later in life at church, the college quad, or the office. Regardless of when or

where we acquire them, our beliefs create the lens through which we see the world. And it's good to recognize the shape of that lens is influenced by relationships, including negative ones.

"The undeniable reality is that how well you do in life and business depends not only on what you do and how you do it . . . but also on who is doing it with you or to you," says psychologist Henry Cloud in *The Power of the Other*.<sup>8</sup> Hang around people like Charlie, and you can start seeing the world from his perspective. And the reverse is also true. Surround yourself with Roberts and everything starts looking up.

If we want to experience our best year ever, we have to begin by recognizing which of these two kinds of thinking dominates and intentionally move toward abundance. There's no reason to let limiting beliefs hold us back.

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## You Choose

Shortly after Apple CEO Steve Jobs died in 2011, family, friends, and others gathered at Memorial Church on the Stanford University campus. The invitation-only event drew several hundred to pay tribute to a visionary innovator and leader they had come to admire, respect, and love. Journalist Brent Schlender recounts the moment at the close of his book *Becoming Steve Jobs*.

Bono, Joan Baez, and Yo-Yo Ma performed. Oracle founder Larry Ellison spoke, as did lead Apple designer Jony Ive. But what struck Schlender the most were the words of Jobs's wife, Laurene Powell. "He shaped how I came to view the world," she said of her husband, adding:

It is hard enough to see what is already there, to remove the many impediments to a clear view of reality, but Steve's gift was even greater: he saw clearly what was not there, what could be there, what had to be there. His mind was never a captive of reality. Quite the contrary. He imagined what reality lacked, and he set out to remedy it.

As a result, she said, Jobs possessed "an epic sense of possibility."<sup>9</sup>

So ask yourself: What's not in your world right now that could be, *must* be there? What's lacking that only you can remedy in your relationships, your health, your career, or your spiritual life? As we begin to think about designing our best year ever, we need to recognize that most of the barriers we face are imaginary. There are a million thoughts running through our heads, but we alone get to choose what we're going to believe. And the best way to overcome limiting beliefs is to replace them with liberating truths. It's possible to upgrade our beliefs.

## You Can Upgrade Your Beliefs

Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion.

MUHAMMAD ALI

In 1954, Martin Luther King Jr. accepted the ministerial call from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He was just twenty-five years old. But what King accomplished over the next decade would radically reshape American society.

In 1955, after Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat, King led the Montgomery bus boycott. The US Supreme Court sided with the boycotters in 1956. A year later, King formed and led the Southern Christian Leaders Conference, which helped organize the burgeoning civil rights movement. He also spoke before his first national audience and made the cover of *Time* magazine. But that was only the beginning.

King's organizing and protest work continued in the late fifties and early sixties with sit-ins and protests, culminating in the events of 1963. That April, King was arrested in Birmingham for disobeying a ban on demonstrations. When he came under fire from local ministers, he responded with one of his most important and memorable works, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." A few months later, he led the March on Washington, attended by over 200,000 people.

It was the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and King gave his stirring "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The demonstration galvanized nationwide support for civil rights. Earlier that summer, President John F. Kennedy had introduced the nation's most sweeping civil rights legislation to date, and the impact of the march and King's advocacy was instrumental in its passage in 1964.

If that wasn't enough, *Time* picked King as its person of the year, and the Nobel committee made him the youngest-ever recipient of the Peace Prize. There was more work to do, but he'd already turned the world upside down. He was just thirty-five years old. What was his

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## Avoiding the Trap of Limiting Beliefs

King's critics in Birmingham thought his actions were "unwise and untimely," that they violated "common sense." But unlike King, these ministers were laboring under a limiting belief: they held an idea about the world that limited their range of possibilities. Instead of seeing King's actions as paving the way for change, they saw them as counterproductive. They worried his actions would cause them to lose ground. But this is just one of a million examples in life where "common sense" is simply another way of saying "widely held misunderstanding."

A limiting belief is a misunderstanding of the present that shortchanges our future. King was surrounded by limiting beliefs like these:

- The civil rights movement is asking for too much too fast.
- The movement is stirring up unnecessary trouble.
- Nonviolence won't move the needle. Armed resistance is needed.
- Whites won't change. Racial reconciliation is impossible.
- Racism is engrained in the culture. We'll never change that, let alone the law.

And there were many, many others shared by both white and black people, inside and outside the movement. The difference between King and others was that he rejected those beliefs as untrue. Instead, he believed that the times called for urgent action. He believed that nonviolent demonstrations were necessary and effective. He believed that racial reconciliation was a real hope and that hearts—and the whole society—could really change.

Instead of limiting beliefs, King embraced liberating truths. He looked at the same facts as everyone else, but he used a different frame, to use the Zanders' language from earlier. That's what his "I Have a Dream" speech was all about. He could see a better future, regardless of what some people said or believed. His frame allowed him to visualize the victory, and he knew in his bones that he would someday realize it as well. These liberating truths freed him to act with determination—and we can do the same thing.



Beliefs can keep us stuck. But we can get unstuck by upgrading our beliefs.

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## Trade Your Frame

Few of our aspirations will measure up to the accomplishments of Martin Luther King Jr. But they do matter to the one and only life we'll ever have. And they can make all the difference in the world for us and the people nearest to us.

One of my favorite examples of replacing limiting beliefs with liberating truths comes from the Alcoholics Anonymous community. Researchers at Brown University, UC Berkeley, and the National Institutes of Health worked together on a major study. They found the difference maker for people trying to stay sober was belief. Instead of saying, "I can't resist a drink," people in AA find they actually can resist. Why? Because now they believe the liberating truth "Change is possible." Or instead of thinking, "I can't get sober," AA participants swap that for the liberating truth: "I can manage life's difficulties without a drink."<sup>1</sup>

Here's another example from my friend Don Miller. Don's a bestselling author and tremendous entrepreneur. But after a string of failed relationships, he figured he was doomed at love. Then out of the blue Bob Goff called.

"You know what I've noticed about you, Don?" Bob started. "I've noticed that you're good at relationships." Don wasn't buying. He was terrible at relationships, and he knew it for certain. But Bob kept calling him and telling him the opposite. He gave example after example of times Don had really bonded with people. "For the next few months there was a yawning chasm between Bob's affirmation and the way I felt about myself," Don said. But Bob's persistence paid

off. “Like a trial lawyer he argued his case into my soul, week after week, until the chasm began to close.” Don realized Bob was right. And the more he realized it, the more he was able to act on it and prove it to himself. The new belief enabled him to be vulnerable, hopeful, and act with confidence. It turned out Don was terrific at relationships—and he went on to date and marry the love of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Let me give you some examples from my own life. I used to believe I couldn’t get ahead because I could barely make enough money to meet our family’s needs. When I recognized that thought as a limiting belief, I determined to replace it with a liberating truth. So I started saying, “I have all the money I need to meet our obligations, accomplish our goals, and be generous with others.” It sure didn’t feel that way at first. But instead of operating from scarcity, I chose to operate from a place of abundance. It wasn’t magic. But it did open new pathways that allowed me to move forward. And the more I moved, the more resources I found to improve my circumstances.

Here’s another. “I don’t feel like doing that right now,” I used to say. “I’m exhausted.” I thought my energy was something I had no control over. Either I felt energetic, or not. But then I realized I had agency. I could influence what I experienced. So I swapped that limiting belief for a liberating truth that went like this: “I have more than enough energy to accomplish the tasks I undertake.” I repeated that to myself every time I felt exhausted or tired. It wasn’t long before my reality caught up to my words. In all of these examples, changing beliefs made better outcomes possible. It’s not magic. You already have what it takes to move the needle in your life.

Everyone’s different and we all have our own portfolio of limiting beliefs. But in all my coaching, I’ve encountered two that many of us share. The first is that we have no power to change our circumstances, and the second is that we lack the resources to do so. I want to look at both of these in turn.

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## When We Feel Powerless

Erin Gruwell was a rookie school teacher assigned to a tough, newly integrated high school in Long Beach, California. Her diverse classroom was packed with at-risk kids, some of them gangbangers who hated their teacher even more than they hated each other. “My class has become a dumping ground for disciplinary transfers, kids in rehab or those on probation,” she said.<sup>3</sup> Most everyone had given up on these students. The administration didn’t hold much hope she could make a difference. Even her dad thought she should find a new



job. Fortunately for her students, Gruwell believed she could succeed with these kids where others had failed.

She started by chucking the standard curriculum and assigning “books about teens in crisis,” including Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl* and Zlata Filipović’s *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Wartime Sarajevo*. Just as important, she required them to journal about their experiences. In the process and through the years, her kids’ lives were transformed. Against the odds, she helped one hundred fifty students learn, grow, and graduate. Most went to college. Some became teachers themselves.

We all have more power than we sometimes give ourselves credit for. According to Stanford University psychology professor Albert Bandura, this power comprises four properties that help us achieve our goals. The first is *intention*. We can imagine a better reality than the one we’re currently experiencing. And we can work with others and within our circumstances to achieve it. Second, *forethought*. By visualizing the future, we can govern our behavior in the present and give purpose and meaning to our actions. Third, *action*. We have the ability to act on our plans, to stay motivated, and to respond in the moment to remain on course. Finally, *self-reflection*. We not only act, we know we act. That means we can evaluate how we’re doing, make adjustments, and even revise our plans.<sup>4</sup>

Erin Gruwell put all of these to work in her teaching. She knew her involvement in her kids’ lives could make a difference. She built a program that would accomplish her intent. She got started, made course corrections along the way, and little by little changed the lives of one hundred fifty students who would have otherwise been left behind—not to mention changing her own life.

Whatever our circumstances, we have the power to pursue a better future. Some don’t buy it. They think because they can’t control everything, they can control nothing. But that’s only a limiting belief. By our choices we become active participants in the outcomes we experience.

During the final difficult months of the bus boycott in 1956, King preached a sermon to encourage his congregation to live hopeful lives of creative action. “Lord, help me to accept my tools,” he told them to pray. “However dull they are, help me to accept them. And then Lord, after I have accepted my tools, then help me to set out and do what I can do with my tools.”<sup>5</sup> To show how powerful our humble tools can be, King pointed to the example of Moses, who discarded his limiting beliefs and led his people to freedom. As we’ve seen, King proved the validity of his point by his own example.

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# The Resource Question

Gruwell's story also reminds us to avoid limiting our goals to our current resources. Resources are never—and I mean never—the main challenge in achieving our dreams. In fact, if you already have everything you need to achieve your goal, then your goal's probably too small.

When Gruwell first started out, she had no budget for books. But her students needed certain books if her plan was going to work. The answer? She got a second job and bought the books herself. As Gruwell's goals grew, so did her need for resources. Her students wanted to bring Miep Gies, the Dutch woman whose family hid Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis, to the school to lecture. The school didn't have the budget, so the students held a series of fundraisers to make it happen. And that wasn't all. They also raised funds to bring Zlata Filipović, whose book they studied, to America.



“Resources are  
never the main  
challenge in  
achieving our  
dreams.”

The more they determined to step out, the more the necessary resources appeared. Their determination was the difference maker. “There is no deficit in human resources,” as King said in his 1964 Nobel lecture, “the deficit is in human will.”

Resources are necessary, but they're never the precondition for success. The perceived lack of resources is often a benefit in disguise. In fact, dealing with constraints can trigger a cascade of unforeseen rewards. For one, they force us to rise to the occasion and give our best to the pursuit. Easy resources make for weak performance. Economist Julian Simon called human creativity the ultimate resource, but often limitations are needed to unleash it. A lack of resources spurs resourcefulness. Limited resources also builds resiliency and confidence. The more times we overcome difficulties, the more capable we are of overcoming whatever comes next.

In short, an apparent lack of resources might be the most important resource we have. Our limiting beliefs keep us from seeing that. But here's a liberating truth: we live in a world of genuine abundance, a world full of the resources we need to pursue our most important goals. That doesn't mean you won't ultimately require the resources you currently lack. If your goal is big enough, you'll probably require more and different resources than you assume when you start. *But start.* A lack of resources is never a good excuse to stay put. Treat it instead as a prompt for what to tackle as the next step toward your goal.

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## Revise Your Beliefs

You don't have to be hemmed in by limiting beliefs. You can exchange them for liberating truths. I'd like to suggest a simple six-step process to help you do that. Please note: It's good to have a notebook or journal for this exercise.

First, *recognize the limiting belief*. I mentioned several giveaways in the last chapter. If a belief reflects black-and-white thinking, it might be a limiting belief. Same thing if it's personalizing, catastrophizing, or universalizing. It could be coming from past experience, the media, or your social circle. Whatever the content of the belief, no matter how true it seems, it's important to recognize that it's just an opinion about reality—and there's a good shot it's wrong.

Second, *record the belief*. It might be something like,

- "I don't have enough experience."
- "I don't have the right experience."
- "I can't write."
- "I always quit."
- "I'm not creative."

- “I always fail eventually.”
- “I’m not very good with money.”
- “I’m not very disciplined.”
- “I’m terrible with technology.”

Let’s be honest. It could be anything. We all have our own challenges. The first time she did this exercise, Natalee, one of my *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* course alumni, was the tired young mom of two. She had recently quit her job and moved with her family to a new city. “One of my limiting beliefs was I just don’t have enough energy,” she told me. “I can’t get to this because I’m trying to provide for these two little humans.” That was just the start. Another of Natalee’s limiting beliefs: “Maybe I am meant to be mediocre and maybe I’m just meant to have a life of insignificance.”

I had a friend who was laid off from his job in his midfifties. I’ll call him Greg. The Great Recession was in full swing, and he had a really difficult time getting reemployed. Over the course of three years, I started seeing this story taking root in his thinking. He would say, “Well, I’m just too old.” He also had two graduate degrees. Then the story became, “I’m overeducated.” Greg’s situation was tough, no doubt about it. But the culprit was not his age or his education. It was his beliefs about his age and education.

Try to jot down your limiting belief word for word. By writing it down you externalize it. Now you’re free to evaluate it.

Third, *review the belief*. Start by evaluating whether the belief is empowering. Try to look at it objectively. Is it enabling you to accomplish the outcomes you want, or is it preventing you from doing so? Be honest. “It was hard to see those words on paper, and I realized that I thought that about myself,” Natalee admitted. Until she wrote it down, it clouded her thinking. By externalizing it, she was free to confront it. It’s important to note that people are sometimes addicted to their limiting beliefs, just like Charlie from earlier. Maybe it gives them a sense of certainty. Maybe it gives them a sense of drama or significance because they think they’ve got the world figured out. Honest evaluation is the key to freedom.

Fourth, *reject or reframe the belief*. If a limiting belief is false, you can simply reject it. Sometimes this is a straight swap like my personal examples above. That’s what Natalee did. “When I saw those limiting beliefs I wrote down about me, I realized that those came from such a dark place,” she said. “That’s just not who I was. That was almost coming from somewhere else. Writing down the opposite of that—those liberating truths—felt so good to say something positive about myself and to begin to taste that confidence and see the hope and possibility of what I could become if I really started to believe in

myself.”

To pull this off, you might need to martial a case, just like Bob Goff did for Don Miller. Bob took Don’s limiting belief (“I’m no good at relationships”) and offered him a liberating truth in exchange (“I’m good at relationships”), then pressed his case with supporting examples.

Reframing is a bit more involved. Many limiting beliefs have a kernel of truth in them. That’s what makes them so convincing. But they’re not the whole truth. If a limiting belief is true or partly true, you don’t have to settle for it. You can always recast the story. Take the example of the media. Yes, there’s a lot of bad news, but it’s only part of the picture. Against what news anchors are always saying, the evidence shows the world is actually getting better in a number of key areas:

- The number of annual hours worked continues to fall.
- The number of democracies in the world continues to rise.
- The number of people enslaved continues to fall.
- Violent crime rates continue to fall.
- The number of wars continues to decrease.
- World life expectancy continues to rise.
- Pay and college degrees awarded to women continue to rise.<sup>6</sup>

And the list goes on.

In response to Greg, who blamed his unemployment on his age, I pointed to the fact that older workers often have assets employers covet and which are perfectly suited for the entrepreneurial environments, including life experience, intellectual capital, and deep social networks. Researchers at Duke and Harvard studied startups earning at least \$1 million and discovered the founders’ median age was thirty-nine. “Twice as many were older than 50 as were younger than 25,” said Vivek Wadhwa, who led the research team. “In a follow-up project, we studied the backgrounds of 549 successful entrepreneurs in 12 high-growth industries,” he added. “The average and median age of male founders in this group was 40, and a significant proportion were older than 50.”<sup>7</sup> Age has its advantages.

And it’s the same with youth. Early in my career I felt I was too young to succeed, and I hear people say similar things all the time. But it’s a convenient excuse. Some of the most energetic and effective executives and business owners in my *Free to Focus*<sup>TM</sup> productivity workshops are in their twenties and thirties. I’ll come back to Natalee’s entrepreneurial story later, but she’s in the same boat. Another friend, who’s not even thirty, owns multimillion-dollar online

properties and nearly a hundred convenience stores and gas stations. If you think your age is the problem, you need to reframe.

When we obsess on what's wrong, we miss what's right. It skews our view and blinds us to opportunities all around us. Perhaps you think, "I'm not a details person." Fine. Is being a details person a necessity? You could accept that it is and stall out. Or you could reframe it and say something like this: "I'm not a details person, but I can always collaborate with someone who is or outsource the details."

Fifth, *revise the belief*. This is where it gets interesting. I'm not talking about simple affirmations, though those can be helpful and have their place. I'm talking about reorienting your thinking around a new and liberating truth. If, for instance, you think, "I'm too old to be considered for that job opportunity," you might say, "I have more experience than other candidates." Conversely, if you think, "I'm too young for that job," you might say instead, "I've got more energy and enthusiasm than other candidates." Imagine the difference that perspective makes in a job interview. The old "truth" holds you back. The new one gives you a foothold for real progress. Make sure you write down the revised belief.

Sixth and finally, *reorient yourself to the new belief*. Start living from the perspective of this new, liberating truth. You might not fully buy into it. That's fine. Try it on. It may feel awkward at first, like putting on a coat that's too big. But if you keep telling yourself the truth, it will eventually fit, and you'll get more comfortable with it. Every time the old belief crops up, reject or reframe it and restate the liberating truth. The trick is to start living as if it's true. The more we do so, the more we bring our experience into alignment with our expectations.

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## What Are Your Limiting Beliefs?

So let me ask you: What are your limiting beliefs? They could be beliefs about the world, others, or yourself. What are the stories and expectations that prevent you from living the kind of life you want, the kind of life you were meant to live? If you haven't already, I encourage you to write down your limiting beliefs. Draw a line down a page. On one side place your limiting beliefs. On the other write corresponding liberating truths. Consider the side with your liberating truths your new personal manifesto for achieving your goals.

You have what it takes. Upgrading your beliefs is the first step toward experiencing your best year ever. The next step is to get resolution on the past so you can move confidently into the future.

# STEP 1

## ACTION PLAN



### 1. Recognize the Power of Your Beliefs

“Our thoughts determine our lives,” as the Serbian monk Thaddeus of Vitovnica said. Both positively and negatively, your beliefs have tremendous impact on your experience of life. Recognizing that fact is the first stage in experiencing your best year ever.

### 2. Confront Your Limiting Beliefs

We all have limiting beliefs about the world, others, and ourselves. Four indicators you’re trapped in a limiting belief are whether your opinion is formed by:

- Black-and-white thinking
- Personalizing
- Catastrophizing
- Universalizing

It’s also important to identify the source of your limiting beliefs, whether it’s past experience, the news media, social media, or negative relationships.

### 3. Upgrade Your Beliefs

Get a notebook or a pad of paper and draw a line down



the middle of the page so you have two columns. Now use this six-step process to swap your limiting beliefs for liberating truths.

**RECOGNIZE** your limiting belief. Upgrading your thinking starts with awareness, so take a minute to reflect on what beliefs are holding you back.

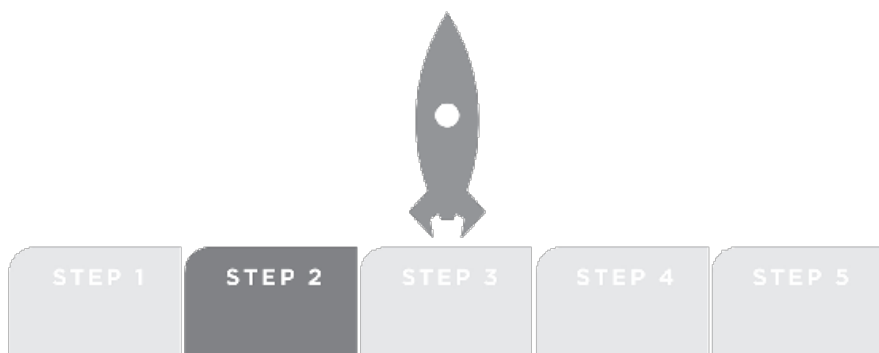
**RECORD** the belief. In the left-hand column, jot down the belief. Writing it down helps you externalize it.

**REVIEW** the belief. Evaluate how the belief is serving you. Is it empowering? Is it helping you reach your goals?

**REJECT/REFRAME** the belief. Sometimes you can simply contradict a limiting belief. Other times, you might need to build a case against it or look at your obstacles from a better angle.

**REVISE** the belief. In the right-hand column write down a new liberating truth that corresponds to the old limiting belief.

**REORIENT** yourself to the new belief. Commit to living as if it's true.



## Complete the Past

Remember Uncle Rico from *Napoleon Dynamite*? In his middle age he's got nothing to show for his life. But when he hears about Napoleon's mail-order time machine, he gets wistful. "Ohhhh, man I wish I could go back in time. I'd take state," he says.

His whole life is framed by the disappointment of not getting his chance to win in high school football. "Coach woulda put me in fourth quarter, we would've been state champions," he says. "No doubt in my mind."<sup>1</sup>

We all know people stuck in the same kind of rut, don't we? That probably includes us to some degree, if we're honest. After limiting beliefs, the next most common barrier we encounter is the past. We tow it around like a trailer full of broken furniture. We can't fully consider the future because we're too tied up in what's already happened.

I don't want that to happen to you. If it does, it'll prevent you from experiencing your best year ever. Step 2 explains how to get the resolution you need.

## Thinking Backward Is a Must

We drive into the future using only our rear view mirror.

MARSHALL MCLUHAN

I've spent most of my professional life in publishing. I've worked pretty much every job in the business—marketing, editorial, management. I even spent some time in literary representation and artist management. One of my clients had a number of very successful projects under his belt, and I was setting him up for what my business partner and I hoped would be a major new deal.

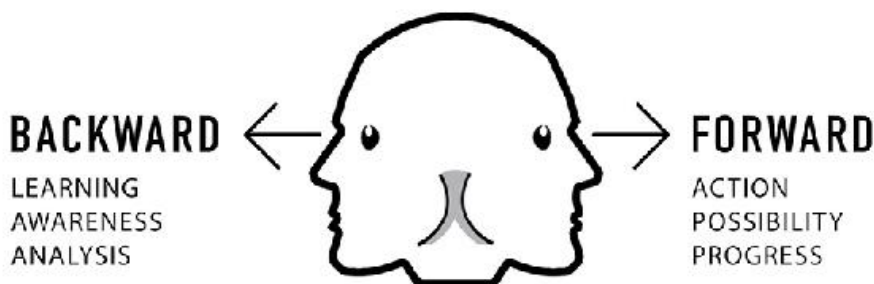
I worked my tail off for about a year, focusing exclusively on this one client. Before taking his new book to publishers, my business partner and I conducted a ninety-day, thirty-city tour with our client. Turnout was fantastic. We ran between fifteen hundred and two thousand people a night. When it was all done, my team and I were exhausted. But it was worth it. Our client's existing publisher took notice and offered a preemptive two-book deal for a million dollars a book. *Wow!* My partner and I were over-the-moon excited. We invested a lot in this deal, and it was about to pay off in a big way.

We told our client and expected an enthusiastic response. But then we couldn't get our calls returned. It was stone-cold silence. Something was up. After trying for a few weeks, I finally got a response. It was written in legalese, but the message was clear. On the verge of my biggest deal to date, I got fired.

The deal I lined up for my client was huge, but it made him think he could land an even bigger fish. He signed with an agency that promised they could do better. Meanwhile, I was left high and dry with nothing to show for my yearlong investment. It sent me into a tailspin. I was an emotional wreck. I felt like my career was over.

Completing the past is an essential part of designing a better future. “Reasoning flows not only forward,” as psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Dale T. Miller say, “but also backward, from the experience to what it reminds us of or makes us think about.” They call this “the power of backward thinking.”<sup>1</sup> If we’re going to experience our best year ever, we need to harness the power of backward thinking for ourselves. Why?

We can’t complete the past until we acknowledge what we’ve already experienced. As a friend told me, “An experience is not complete until it is remembered.” We can’t just ignore it or wish it away. Whatever we have experienced over the last twelve months—or even further back—must be addressed. If we try to ignore it, it’s just going to come back to bite us. How? Sometimes we live inside unhelpful stories we tell ourselves. Other times we nurse grievances to justify our current actions or feel unvalued because we were slighted or disregarded in some way. If we don’t get resolution, we’ll drag all our unfinished business into the future, and it will sabotage everything we’re trying to build going forward.



We can reason forward and back. Backward thinking allows us to learn and grow, which facilitates greater progress in the future.

Now, before going any further, I want to stress something. The process I outline next is designed to help you deal with setbacks and frustrations. It’s not designed to help you deal with serious trauma. Many of us have endured some real shocks, even catastrophes. Maybe you lost a marriage. Maybe you lost a loved one. Maybe you experienced an accident, an illness, a violent attack, or the total loss of your business. Unless and until you deal with traumatic events, they can influence and even define your future in deeply unhealthy ways.

What I detail below can only get you so far. If you need to bring in outside resources, such as a therapist, I recommend you do. As Brené Brown says, that’s “pure courage.”<sup>2</sup> For the rest of us, listing our disappointments and processing them can suffice.

# The After-Action Review

The US Army has a helpful backward-thinking method. It's called the After-Action Review. First developed in 1981, America's armed forces have been using it ever since to improve performance and get better at what they do. After an event, the goal is to understand what happened, why it happened, and how they can improve. Lots of businesses use this process, and we can use it too. This kind of backward thinking will put you in an excellent frame of mind as you get ready to design your future and experience your best year ever.

Marilyn Darling, Charles Parry, and Joseph Moore studied the After-Action Review process for *Harvard Business Review*. They give the example of a training battle in the California desert. I'll call the two sides Team 1 and Team 2. Team 1 was top-notch and rarely defeated. Their job was to help train Team 2 by running them through a near-life scenario. But in this case, Team 2 managed to surprise the trainers with an unforeseen attack plan. *Whoops!* Team 2 broke Team 1's defenses and left them outgunned and outmaneuvered.

So let's ask: Did the trainers hang their heads in shame and defeat? No. Instead, they conducted an After-Action Review. They studied what went wrong, what went right, and how to adjust their approach in the future. In fact, Team 1's commander called it "a good rehearsal" for upcoming engagements. Why is this important? Because completing the past is all about moving into the future. As the authors of the *HBR* study said, an After-Action Review is "a living, pervasive process that explicitly connects past experience with future action."<sup>3</sup>

I'll next break down this review process into its four key stages. We'll move through each stage with several questions, and I encourage you to use a journal or notebook to jot down your answers. Writing is a powerful tool for leveraging the power of backward thinking. According to a study by University of California researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky, Lorie Sousa, and Rene Dickerhoof, "Participants who processed a negative experience through writing or talking reported improved life satisfaction and enhanced mental and physical health relative to those who [merely] thought about it."<sup>4</sup> Ready to begin?

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## Stage 1: State What You Wanted to Happen

For the military, this is pretty straightforward. Think of it as the battle

plan or the object of the mission. For us, this could be your list of goals from the prior year. It could also be something less definite. Maybe it's a hope, dream, or unstated expectation.

Start by asking yourself how you saw the year going. What were your plans, your dreams, your concrete goals if you had any? Don't focus on just one or two areas. Remember, our lives consist of ten interrelated domains: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, marital, parental, social, vocational, avocational, and financial. It's important to get clear on what you wanted to happen across all these domains. In the case of my personal example above, I wanted to raise my client's visibility, enhance his desirability to publishers, and land the biggest deal of my career to that point.

Blake, one of my *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alumni, planned to move to New York, find a new job, and invest in a long-term relationship. But right before he took the leap, life took a turn. His girlfriend broke off their relationship while he was visiting in New York. It was a Monday. On Wednesday his neighbor back home called to say a tree had fallen on his house. "Fortunately nobody got hurt," Blake said. "But they did condemn the building." If that weren't enough, his mom called that same week and said she was selling her house—which was an emotional blow because he grew up there and had a lot of attachment to the place. "So I went from going to pursue this girl and do this new career to no relationship, homeless, and no childhood home either." If his year were a movie, Blake said it should have been titled *I Didn't Expect It to Go That Way*.

Maybe you can relate. As you think through each life domain, don't be surprised if you start feeling uncomfortable. I can tell you from previous students who have worked this process that you might experience profound emotion. Some people feel disappointment. Some feel sad. Others get angry. "I had so much emotional baggage around having failed achieving my goals in the past and around my health problems, and unresolved conflicts in relationships," admitted Ray, another *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum. "I never before had the emotional experience I had going through that complete-the-past exercise." Others enjoy real excitement.

This isn't true for everyone, of course. Mileage varies, as they say. Don't be surprised if you don't feel any significant emotion at all. The important thing is to just be aware of your feelings as you work through these four stages.

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## Stage 2: Acknowledge What Actually Happened

As you stated what you wanted to happen, you probably became aware of gaps. You wanted to drive from Los Angeles to New Jersey. Meanwhile, your car threw a rod in Arkansas. There's a distance between your desire and current reality. Some of your goals, perhaps many of them, remain unfulfilled. So ask yourself: What disappointments or regrets did I experience this past year?

Because these memories can be painful, it's tempting to dismiss or ignore them. But as journalist Carina Chocano says, "The point of regret is not to try to change the past, but to shed light on the present."<sup>5</sup> You don't want to leave these hanging in the air or push them behind you like they don't matter. Both will prevent you from taking meaningful action in the present. I'll return to the subject of regret in the next chapter. I want to share some research findings that can trigger powerful personal and professional growth in the coming year. For now, it's enough to jot down your disappointments so you can begin doing business with them.

Another question to ask yourself: What did you feel you should have been acknowledged for but weren't? This question was powerful for 5 *Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum James: "A lot of my limiting beliefs came from the past and the failures I had," he said. "Truthfully, they weren't big failures, but my mindset at the time was 'You're failing, you're failing, you're failing.' There were a lot of things that I wasn't acknowledged for. And I translated that into, 'Well, you must have not done well enough.'" When he recognized that, James was able to reframe it. "No," he told himself, "you weren't acknowledged because you're in the wrong place." That realization ultimately led to renewed confidence and an important career change.

Let's face it: Some version of that story happens to all of us. Maybe you're a single mom who works hard, provides for your kids, and overcomes the odds every day. Or maybe you made the heroic decision to stand for your marriage when you really felt like quitting. Maybe you committed to sacrifice part of your morning to exercise when it felt like you really didn't have the time. Whatever it is, there's real emotional power in just admitting what we wished others would have noticed and commended in our actions but maybe didn't.

Don't stop there. What did you accomplish this past year that you were most proud of? Completing the past is not just about processing failures and disappointments. It's also about acknowledging and celebrating your wins. It's important to observe not only what went wrong but also what went right and how your beliefs and behaviors contributed to that outcome. We often downplay this or never think to do it. But it's key to recognizing our agency and how we've overcome obstacles already. That gives us confidence for the future. It could have been something like running a 10K or even a half marathon this

last year. Or maybe you celebrated a milestone in your job or marriage. Maybe you completed a degree or paid off the last of your student debt. Maybe you launched a new business or you beat your sales targets by a significant percentage. Regardless of what it is, it's important to acknowledge what you accomplished this past year. I bet you're doing better than you give yourself credit for.

Natalee, the *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum I introduced earlier in Step 1, said this exercise was “pivotal” for her. She came alive as she analyzed the positive impact she had on people she left in her previous job. “I realized that I had done some really amazing things,” she said. “It felt good for me to acknowledge that myself. But it also felt good to acknowledge that I was moving across the country and I was picking up my whole life. I was quitting this job that I loved, and I was doing it for my family. It was really good that I took the time to congratulate myself on those accomplishments.”

To finish this stage, it's useful to tease out some themes. What were two or three specific themes that kept recurring? These could be single words, phrases, or even complete sentences. For me, this past year was about being wildly productive while protecting my margin. Not only did we launch a new book, we also created and launched a new online course as well. But it was vital for me to do so while still getting the rest and rejuvenation that makes that kind of productivity possible in the first place. That's just me. Maybe your theme was making difficult decisions in a challenging economy. Another one could be challenging negative beliefs about your body. Or maybe it was stepping out and starting a new business. Or restoring a damaged relationship. There are as many examples as there are people.

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## Stage 3: Learn from the Experience

Let me go back to the story that started the chapter. When my client fired me on the verge of our biggest deal to date, it floored me. I thought I had done a great job. Besides, we had enjoyed a long-term personal relationship. I worked my tail off for about a year, focusing exclusively on this one client. But my client wasn't so impressed. He had his eye on bigger things and decided I couldn't take him there. So, without so much as a discussion, he dumped me.

In the end it was a humbling but helpful experience. I learned three important lessons. First, clients (and customers) can be fickle. I couldn't afford to put all my eggs in one basket. If I didn't spread the risk, I might find myself in serious trouble again. Second, I learned I couldn't assume today's victories would be remembered or



appreciated. I had to keep raising the bar. Finally, I learned I needed to secure alignment from all the relevant parties up front. It turned out my client and his board had different ideas about what I was delivering. All three lessons have been invaluable over the years.



“Distill the lessons from your experiences so they can serve as tools moving forward.”

What about you? What were the major life lessons you learned this past year? Unless we learn from our experiences, we can't grow. You've probably heard the line from the Spanish philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." If you have trouble identifying your key lessons from the year, one way to suss them out is to ask what was missing from your success. Maybe it was strategic planning—you wish you had done more of that in your business. Maybe you wish you had saved more money, spent more time with your spouse, or played more with your kids, or taken a sabbatical, or read more books. Listing these missing ingredients is an effective way to learn what went wrong and what it would take to go right in the future.

Santayana also said, "Progress . . . depends on retentiveness."<sup>6</sup> To retain these lessons, you'll want to distill your discoveries into short, pithy statements. That transforms your learning into wisdom to guide your path into the future. Just for example, here's one I wrote down a couple of years ago: "There comes a point in every experience when I'm too far in to quit but almost certain I can't finish. If I keep moving forward, I'll eventually get to the other side." That was an important life lesson for me to learn at that time, and I can pull it up when I face similar experiences today. Here's another one: "Don't overthink the outcome, just do the next right thing." Or, "I can do anything I want. I just can't do everything I want." I'm still not done learning that lesson!

You get the idea. Distill the lessons from your experiences so you don't lose them and so they can serve as tools moving forward.

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## Stage 4: Adjust Your Behavior

If something in your beliefs and behaviors contributed to the gap between what you wanted to happen and what actually happened, something has to change. In fact, that gap will only widen and worsen unless you pivot. It's not enough to acknowledge the gap. It's not even enough to learn from the experience. If you don't change your beliefs and how you act on them, you're actually worse than when you started.

If I hadn't adjusted my behavior as a result of what I learned from getting fired, all that grief would have been for nothing. I would have found myself in the same situation again and again. Instead, as I've progressed in my career I've acted on those lessons and have saved myself a lot of trouble as a result.

I mentioned before that businesses often use After-Action Reviews

to improve their performance. But the improvement doesn't always happen, does it? The reason, according to *Harvard Business Review*, is that organizations drop the ball at the end. They usually don't apply what they learned, so their findings just gather dust on a shelf or get lost on a server someplace. Don't let that happen to you.

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## Going Forward

Despite the rough start, after finishing his After-Action Review, Ray said it was “the most powerful part of the course” for him. Why? “When I was done with that process I felt so clear. It was like there were a thousand little windows open on my computer at the same time, and I was able to—*click*—close all the windows. It was very freeing.”

I bet the same will be true for you. Thinking backward like this can help us learn from the past and positively build our futures. The four stages of an effective After-Action Review are beneficial for completing your past. But it's also beneficial to recognize that some of our greatest disappointments may lead us to our greatest possibilities for the new year. I'll cover that next.

## Regret Reveals Opportunity

My new rule: whenever things go wrong, wait and see what better thing is coming.

SCOTT CAIRNS, *Short Trip to the Edge*

Early in my career I was a busy executive working to make my mark in the publishing industry. Books were my world, and I loved my work. I was hungry and eager to advance. But work was only part of my life. My wife, Gail, and I started having children a few years after we got married. We had five daughters in less than ten years. As you can imagine, life was crazy.

Given the size of my family, I felt a lot of financial pressure. That, coupled with my natural ambition, was a powerful cocktail. I worked long hours, hoping I could get another promotion and the raise that came with it. For most of those years I also managed extra work on the side to meet our needs and gain financial ground.

Long story short, I often felt overwhelmed with all I had to do. I felt guilty for not spending more time at home, and I was teetering on the edge of burnout. The stakes at work were too high. But the stakes at home were higher still. Somehow I kept it all going, even through a few serious business crises. But eventually I found out that I was in danger of losing my connection with my daughters, and Gail sometimes felt like she was a single mom, widowed by all my work.

Honestly, things were touch-and-go at times. As I became aware of the cost my absorption with work inflicted on my family, it was like a giant regret bomb went off in my lap. Chances are good you can identify to one degree or another.

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### There's No Autocorrect for Tattoo Needles

When I was young, the only people with tattoos were bikers, convicts, and sailors. Over the last couple of decades, that's changed in a big way. Where I live, just outside Nashville, Tennessee, it's impossible to miss elaborate, colorful designs on full display or peeking out of shirt collars, sleeves, and trousers. And that's true all over. According to a recent Harris Poll, nearly a third of American adults have a tattoo these days.<sup>1</sup> The percentage is higher at home. Three of my daughters have tattoos.

So far my girls love theirs. That's true for most, but regrets are normal. About one in four laments the decision. Why? Tattoos can last far longer than the desire to get one. Beyond that, not everyone with an ink gun is Michelangelo, and tattoo needles don't come with autocorrect. Here are a few that miss the mark:

- "Never Forget God isint Finished with me Yet"
- "Everything happends for a reason"
- "Life Is a Gambee So Take the Chance"
- "No Dream Is To Big"
- "Regret Nohing"

According to the Harris Poll, poor execution is one of the main reasons people regret tattoos. A website I checked had well over nine hundred examples of bungled designs, including the ones above.<sup>2</sup> No wonder tattoo removal is now the fastest-growing cosmetic procedure in the world.<sup>3</sup> And no wonder unflattering tattoos are such well-fitting symbols for regret. But that's only part of the picture.

When Brené Brown was researching the topic of regrets for her book *Rising Strong*, a friend sent her a similar example—the parents'-worst-nightmare boyfriend from the Jennifer Aniston movie *We're the Millers*, who proudly shows off his "No Ragrets" tattoo. "It's such a perfect metaphor for what I've learned," Brown said. "If you have no regrets, or you intentionally set out to live without regrets, I think you're missing the very value of regret."<sup>4</sup>

The *value*? One challenge most of us face in completing the past is the nagging feeling that we failed somehow. This isn't tattoos. This is existential. If you're still breathing, you're probably aware of at least one way you haven't measured up. After a little "backward thinking" with help from the last chapter, that number can easily balloon to dozens, even hundreds. It can be a downer.

But this is no tragedy. Some people are a little stunned to think regret has any value at all. Our culture tends to miss it. I don't mean to minimize the pain of regret. The pain can be real and intense. The problem is how quickly we distance ourselves from it. We'd rather not live with the feeling long enough to gain the benefit. That's a big

mistake. When it comes to experiencing your best year ever, we can leverage our regrets to reveal opportunities we would otherwise miss. Look at it the right way, and regret is a gift of God. To quote University of Michigan psychologist Janet Landman in her book on the topic, “It all depends on what you do with it.”<sup>5</sup>

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## The Uses of Regret

Before we look at the benefits, let’s examine one common but unhelpful use of regret: self-condemnation. “The delta between *I am a screwup* and *I screwed up* may look small,” says Brown, “but in fact it’s huge.”<sup>6</sup> When we focus on ourselves instead of our performance, we make it harder to address improving next time around for the simple reason that improvement isn’t the focus.

Let’s say you lost your cool with one of your children or a friend. Or let’s say you flubbed a report that cost your business a lucrative new client. You could go on about how bad you are as a person. That would be small comfort to your friend or coworkers and wouldn’t accomplish anything as far as future behavior. Or you can identify the bad performance. Having done that, you’re in a position not only to repair the present breach but also to prevent it from occurring again.

Worse, self-directed regrets sit on the evidence table in the criminal court of our minds as an ever-expanding mound of exhibits, proving all our worst limiting beliefs about ourselves. Never mind the built-in confirmation bias. We’re all fallible, so if you believe *you are a failure*, you’ll never run out of proof. Every new instance further cements the story. And since we tend to experience what we expect, as we’ve seen, you’re likely to just get more of the same. If, on the other hand, you believe *you fail*, you can begin evaluating what’s missing in your performance and seek corrective action. You’re not a failure, so the failure you do experience creates dissonance that requires your attention to resolve. That’s what happened to me when I realized my approach to work was alienating my family. My wife and daughters mattered to me—more than my work—but my actions said otherwise. That dissonance drove me to change my approach and rebuild those relationships.

Landman identifies several benefits of regret. Three are worth mentioning here. First, there’s instruction, which relates back to Stage 3 of the After-Action Review process. Regret is a form of information, and reflecting on our missteps is critical to avoiding those missteps in the future. Next there’s the motivation to change. As Landman says, “Regret may not only tell us that something is wrong, but it can also

move us to do something about it.” I sure felt that with Gail and my daughters. Finally, there’s integrity. Regret can work in us like a moral compass, signaling us when we’ve veered off the path.<sup>7</sup>

These three reasons alone should be enough to rethink our instant dismissal of regret. When the regret bomb blew up in my life, I was able to reevaluate and reorient my priorities. Restoring my most important relationships was hard work, but without regret it would have been impossible. I would have been oblivious to the need or resentful that others weren’t pulling their weight. Regret forced me to own my part in the failure and correct it, and the relationship with my daughters has never been better than it is today. But there’s even more going on here.

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## The Opportunity Principle

Several years ago a pair of researchers from the University of Illinois ranked people’s biggest regrets in life. Neal J. Roese and Amy Summerville combined the results of multiple studies and subjected them to fresh analysis, along with conducting additional studies of their own. Family, finances, and health all made the list, but the six biggest regrets people expressed were about education, career, romance, parenting, self-improvement, and leisure. Notice how these high-regret areas correlate closely to the ten life domains I outlined at the start of the book. If your LifeScore was low in any particular domain, welcome to the human drama. You’re not alone.

Roese and Summerville mapped a three-stage process of action, outcome, and recall. In the first, we take steps toward a goal. In the second, we experience the result of our effort. If unsuccessful, we often trigger regret. Where it gets interesting is stage 3, recall. The researchers found that “feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment are strongest where the chances for corrective reaction are clearest.”<sup>8</sup> Regrets, in other words, don’t just flow backward like a blocked sewer pipe, oozing bad past experiences. They also point forward to new and hopeful possibilities. They called their finding the Opportunity Principle, and it’s almost 180 degrees from our typical assumptions.

Regrets not only goad us toward corrective behavior, studies show we also tend to feel regret the strongest when the opportunity for improvement is at its greatest. No one does well under a crushing burden of regret. Thankfully, our minds have natural processes like reframing to take the weight off, especially when there’s little chance to fix the situation. We’ve recognized that since forever. It’s where we get folk wisdom like “time heals all wounds.”

What we haven't always recognized is that regret sometimes dogs our heels precisely because it is signaling a chance to improve our situation, whether that's going back to college, changing careers, or repairing relationships. Say Roesse and Summerville, "Regret persists in precisely those situations in which opportunity for positive action remains high." This points to at least one reason Landman subtitled her book *The Persistence of the Possible*. Regret is a powerful indicator of future opportunity.

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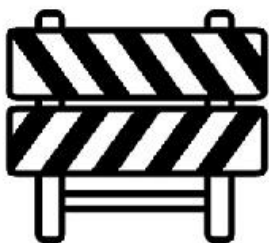
## A Road Sign, Not a Roadblock

The Opportunity Principle is a game changer. Think about your LifeScore. (If you haven't taken the assessment yet, I recommend you do so now at [BestYearEver.me/lifescore](https://BestYearEver.me/lifescore).) In which domains did you score the lowest? Maybe it's your social life, avocational interests, and spiritual development. Or maybe it's your career path or financial health. Whatever those domains are, it's time to rethink regret. Instead of a roadblock to progress, think of it as a road sign pointing the way forward.

These positive features of regret are baked right into our neurobiology. Brain scans locate the experience of regret above our eyes in the medial orbitofrontal cortex. When that portion of the brain has been damaged, patients not only lack feelings of regret, they are unable to correct behavior that would trigger regret in a healthy person.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the fact we feel regret at all is evidence we have what it takes to make positive change in our situations, no matter how dire they might seem. The only people with no hope are those with no regrets.



# ROADBLOCK



HINDERS  
PROGRESS

VS

# ROAD SIGN



SHOWS NEW  
OPPORTUNITY

We can treat regret like a roadblock to our progress—or a road sign that points the way to a better future.

What if your greatest frustrations from the previous year were actually pointing you to some of your biggest wins in the next? What if regret isn't reminding us of what's impossible, but rather pointing us toward what is possible? Instead of seeing our regrets as working against the chance to grow and improve, we can see them as actually pointing the way toward that growth and improvement we most desire. Talk about trading a limiting belief for a liberating truth!

As we take the next step in our journey toward your best year ever, I want to encourage you to stay in a frame of possibility. And I have one more suggestion on how to do it.



“The only  
people with  
no hope are  
those with no  
regrets.”

## Gratitude Makes the Difference

It is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Duke University's Mike Krzyzewski is one of the winningest coaches in college basketball. His players have won over a thousand games and five national championships. And I know his secret. Before their 2015 tournament, Coach K and his players and coaches wrote the names of people who had helped them on a ball. "We told the team, 'We are going to have this ball with us on our way through this tournament, and we would like for you to write on the ball the names of people who have made it possible for you to be here—people who mean something to you,'" Coach K revealed in an interview with journalist Don Yaeger.

The players took the ball everywhere. "Players started carrying the ball around—to team meals, on the plane, at practices, in the locker room," he said. "Some of the guys even slept with it—had it right there with them in their rooms." After the team took the prize, everyone with a name on the ball received a note saying, "Thanks. You were with us every step of the way."<sup>1</sup>

The ball kept gratitude at the center of their game. And it gave the winning edge. Why?

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### The Gratitude Advantage

For a long time researchers have questioned the connection between gratitude and our ability to strive for important goals. There's an unproven but widely held assumption that gratitude can leave people feeling complacent. *If I've got enough*, the thought runs, *then maybe I don't need to achieve more*. You can see how that would be a goal killer. Why set goals when life's good as is? But that didn't sound right

to researchers Robert A. Emmons and Anjali Mishra.

Emmons and Mishra crafted a study comparing grateful and non-grateful goal striving. They had participants keep a gratitude journal, as well as provide a list of goals they hoped to reach over a two-month period. Ten weeks later Emmons and Mishra checked back and found the grateful participants were significantly closer than others to achieving their goals. Gratitude doesn't make us complacent, they said. Instead, "gratitude enhances effortful goal striving."<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons for this, and they all have to do with resiliency. I don't know about you, but I've never met anyone who wins at very much for very long without resiliency. I call these combined reasons the Gratitude Advantage, and it applies not only to basketball players but also to leaders, lawyers, entrepreneurs, parents, pastors, doctors . . . anyone.

# GRATITUDE

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KEEPS US  
**HOPEFUL**



IMPROVES OUR  
**PATIENCE**



REMINDS US WE HAVE  
**AGENCY**



EXPANDS POSSIBLE  
**RESPONSES**

Gratitude has many virtues, but one often overlooked benefit is boosting our resiliency.

The first way gratitude makes us resilient is that it keeps us hopeful. Gratitude is a game of contrasts. Our circumstances look a certain way; then something happens to improve them. Gratitude happens when we take notice of the distance between the two. Suddenly, we have something to be thankful for. That process teaches us something critical about life. While our circumstances might be bad, they can also be better. And our stories prove it to us again and again. Gratitude keeps us positive, optimistic, and able to keep coming back for more when life throws obstacles in our way.

Next, gratitude reminds us we have agency. As we discussed earlier, we have the power to act and effect change in our lives. Because gratitude involves giving thanks for what others have done for us, this might seem counterintuitive. But that's an illusion. You know what they say about unopened gifts. If we didn't use our agency to receive

and act on what others have done for us, we wouldn't have benefited. Coach K and his players never would have made it to the tournament without the names on that ball, but they still did the blocking, shooting, and rebounding. And because of what they were already doing with the gifts others had given, they knew they could keep blocking, shooting, and rebounding all the way to the championships.

Gratitude also improves our patience. A lot of times we take the easy way out because we're impatient. Achieving big goals takes time and effort. We're apt to cut corners or bail when we face difficulties. Thankfully, gratitude can keep us in the game.

David DeSteno of Northwestern University led a study in which participants were asked to recall an event that made them feel grateful, happy, or neutral. After writing about it, they reported their mood and made a series of financial decisions. If they wanted, they could take a cash reward at the end of the session or receive a larger amount by check in the mail at a later date. The grateful were happy to wait for the bigger payout. "On average, we increased people's financial patience by about 12 percent," said DeSteno. "Imagine if you could increase people's savings by that much."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, gratitude expands our possible responses. Gratitude moves us into a place of abundance—a place where we're more resourceful, creative, generous, optimistic, and kind. When we're operating from a place of scarcity, we are more likely to be reactionary, closed-minded, tightfisted, gloomy, and even mean. Researchers tell us that positive emotions like gratitude "broaden one's thought-action repertoire, expanding the range of cognitions and behaviors that come to mind. These broadened mindsets, in turn, build an individual's physical, intellectual, and social resources."<sup>4</sup> In other words, they make us more resilient. They call it the "broaden-and-build theory." But most of us know this from practical experience. We feel better, perform better, and respond to life's ups and downs better when we're grateful.

As Emmons and Mishra concluded after looking at several different studies on gratitude, "The evidence strongly supports the supposition that gratitude promotes adaptive coping and personal growth."<sup>5</sup>

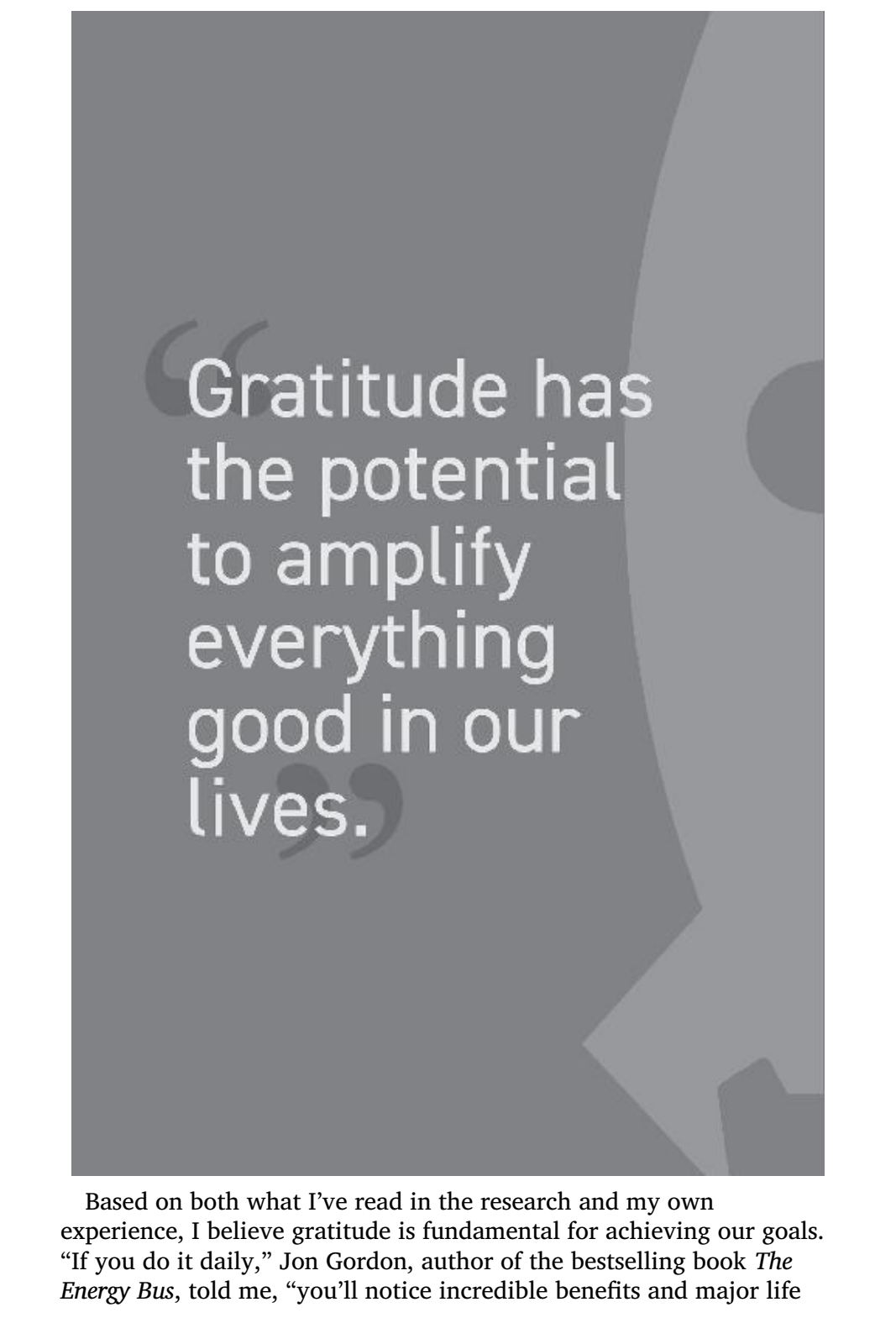
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## Disciplines of Gratitude

Regardless of our individual circumstances, we all can point to assets, blessings, and gifts in our lives. Yes, there are a million things we don't have. But there are a million we do. Whatever our past, if we can see it through the lens of gratitude we will discover that our present is full of more than we can possibly ask or imagine. Gratitude

has the potential to amplify everything good in our lives. It's the best remedy I know for the affliction of scarcity thinking and the best way to cultivate a mindset of abundance.

When I asked successful business and thought leaders how they prepared to reach their goals in the upcoming year, several told me gratitude gave them an edge. Some mentioned setting aside special time to reflect and express gratitude for all the positive they experienced. "I enjoy taking the Thanksgiving holiday to be thankful for all the positive things that happened over the past year, as well as assess how I can change my perspective on the negative things that happened to a healthy one," award-winning podcaster Erik Fisher told me. Robert D. Smith, who manages the Andy Andrews brand, said this: "I set myself up for a great year by writing down fifty things I'm grateful for. I find that taking time to count my blessings keeps my mind focused on helping others and achieving even more than last year."<sup>6</sup>



“Gratitude has  
the potential  
to amplify  
everything  
good in our  
lives.”

Based on both what I’ve read in the research and my own experience, I believe gratitude is fundamental for achieving our goals. “If you do it daily,” Jon Gordon, author of the bestselling book *The Energy Bus*, told me, “you’ll notice incredible benefits and major life

change.”<sup>7</sup>

To leverage the gratitude advantage in my own life, I’ve benefited from adopting these three disciplines.

1. I start and end the day with prayer. Instead of bookending the day with what I failed to get—sleep or accomplishments or whatever—I try focusing on the blessings I do have and expressing them in prayer.
2. I practice thankfulness. Before I get caught in endless comparisons, I express gratitude for the gifts I do have. I find prayer before meals gives me several natural points in the day to do this.
3. I journal my gratitude. Journaling is useful for many things, but expressing and capturing our gratitude is certainly one. Not only do I have the in-the-moment benefit of focusing on the good, I’ve recorded it for later reflection, for those times when things don’t feel like they’re going as well as I had hoped.

That said, gratitude exercises like these don’t always work for everyone. What if you struggle to find a deep sense of gratitude? If that’s true, there’s nothing wrong with you. It can be normal for at least a couple reasons. One is that we’re sometimes in the midst of a moment when gratitude is hard to manage—say, controversy, anger, or resentment. Work on that first. Or find something outside those feelings to be grateful for.

The other reason we might find it hard to sense gratitude in our lives is that the wonder and mystery of it all has become so ordinary. What once delighted and surprised us can later feel rote and predictable. Psychologist Timothy D. Wilson calls this the *pleasure paradox*: We experience something wonderful and try to understand it so we can experience it more often, but once we understand it, we take the edge off the wonder. The way around the pleasure paradox is something he calls the “George Bailey technique.”

In the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey decides the world is better off without him. But the angel Clarence intervenes and shows him an alternate storyline, and it turns out a world without him is worse off by far. So how does it work off the silver screen? “In our research we ask people to mentally subtract from their lives something they cherish,” says Wilson. In one study, Wilson and his colleagues compared people instructed to imagine never meeting, dating, and marrying their spouses with those instructed to simply retell how they met, dated, and married. “Those in the George Bailey condition . . . reported greater happiness with their relationships than did the people randomly assigned to tell the story of how they had met their



spouses.” The difference was the alternate storyline. Imagining something good never happening “made it seem surprising and special again, and maybe a little mysterious,” according to Wilson.<sup>8</sup>

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## **The Future Is Bright**

The truth is that you will never have more of what you want until you become thankful for what you have. Ingratitude creates instant victims in our culture of scarcity. But giving thanks for outrageous abundance inoculates us from the sense of fear, failure, and discontent we sometimes experience and instead creates a path toward success, joy, and fulfillment.

I don’t want you to think or to plan your year out of a place of scarcity. Instead, I want you to start full of gratitude. I began Step 1 with the old saying, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” Changing the rhyme scheme starts with upgrading our beliefs, getting resolution on the past, and looking toward the future with a sense of expectation and the hope that comes from deep gratitude. Now you’re ready to design your future.

## STEP 2

# ACTION PLAN



### 1. Conduct an After-Action Review

To conduct an After-Action Review, work through these four stages: first, state what you wanted to happen; second, acknowledge what actually happened; third, learn from the experience; and fourth, adjust your behavior. I find it's effective to work through these stages by answering these seven questions:

1. How did you see the past year going?
2. What were your plans, your dreams, your concrete goals if you had any?
3. What disappointments or regrets did you experience this past year?
4. What did you feel you should have been acknowledged for but weren't?
5. What did you accomplish this past year that you were most proud of?
6. What were two or three specific themes that kept recurring?
7. What were the major life lessons you learned this past year?

### 2. Find the Opportunity Hidden in Regret

Go back to the third question above, "What disappointments or regrets did you experience this past year?" We often feel the sharpest regret when we have

the greatest chance for a positive remedy. So, ask yourself what opportunities your regrets reveal.

### **3. Try These Gratitude Exercises**

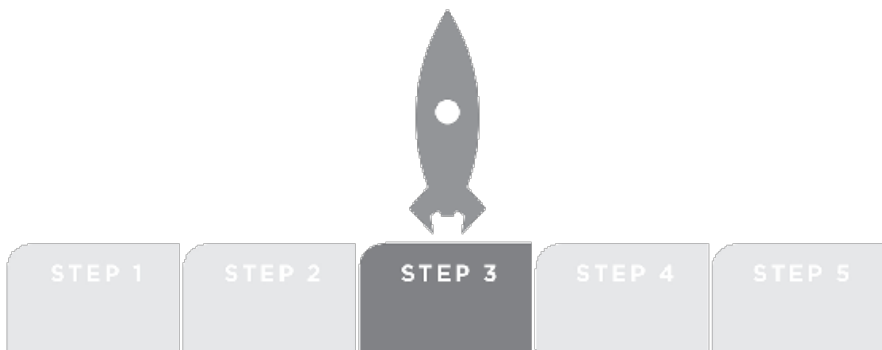
Gratitude is not just a mood, it's a practice. These three exercises can help you get started:

Begin and end the day with prayer.

Practice thankfulness by expressing gratitude for the gifts you have.

Keep a gratitude journal.

If you struggle making headway with these, try the George Bailey technique. Think of something good in your life, and imagine what your life would be like without it.



## Design Your Future

I find it fascinating that on three separate occasions in the Gospels Jesus approaches someone who obviously needs restoration or healing and asks, “What do you want me to do?” What makes this so interesting?

From a Christian perspective Jesus not only knew what these people needed, he could instantly heal them. But he didn’t. Instead, he asked them to declare what they wanted. It seems their *apparent* need was not their *greatest* need. More than healing, they needed clarity. And Jesus was unwilling to meet their physical needs until they got clear on what they wanted. Instead, he first prompted them to verbalize their desire.

Great results don’t just happen. You don’t usually drift to a destination you would have chosen. Instead, you have to be intentional, force yourself to get clear on what you want and why it’s important, and then pursue a plan of action that accomplishes your objective. Step 3 is designed to help you find the clarity you need so you can create the life you want.

And this, my friends, is where it gets fun.

## Great Goals Check Seven Boxes

Do not think or do anything without having some aim in sight; the person who journeys aimlessly will have labored in vain.

MARK THE MONK, *On the Spiritual Law*

In 2002, General Motors determined to boost its share of the US automobile market to 29 percent, a position the company hadn't held since 1999. The company was obsessed with the number. It offered crazy purchase incentives, such as zero-interest loans, to drive sales. Executives even started wearing lapel pins with the number 29 to keep the goal front and center. But they missed it. Why?

GM blamed the competition, especially from South Korea. "If the competition would just play a little fairer, we could do it," one executive complained. But analysts said GM became so focused on the goal, the company undercut its own business to attain it. Because of reckless decisions made in pursuit of their goal, the company ended up bankrupt several years later and dependent on federal bailout dollars just to survive.<sup>1</sup>

And it's not just GM. Other organizations have fallen into similar traps. Remember Enron? Looking at these and other stories, it would be easy to conclude that goal setting is somehow counterproductive, perhaps disastrously so.<sup>2</sup> But that's not my take.

I've been practicing and teaching goal setting far too long for that. I've also seen and experienced far too many successes. Not only can the pitfalls be easily overcome, but we can actually engineer our goals from the outset to avoid them entirely. We can transform our resolutions, aspirations, and dreams into powerful, compelling, written goals that check seven key boxes. But before I unpack this framework, I want to address why we should bother writing our goals. Since written goals are the foundation on which you build your best year ever, it deserves some explanation.

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# The Importance of Written Goals

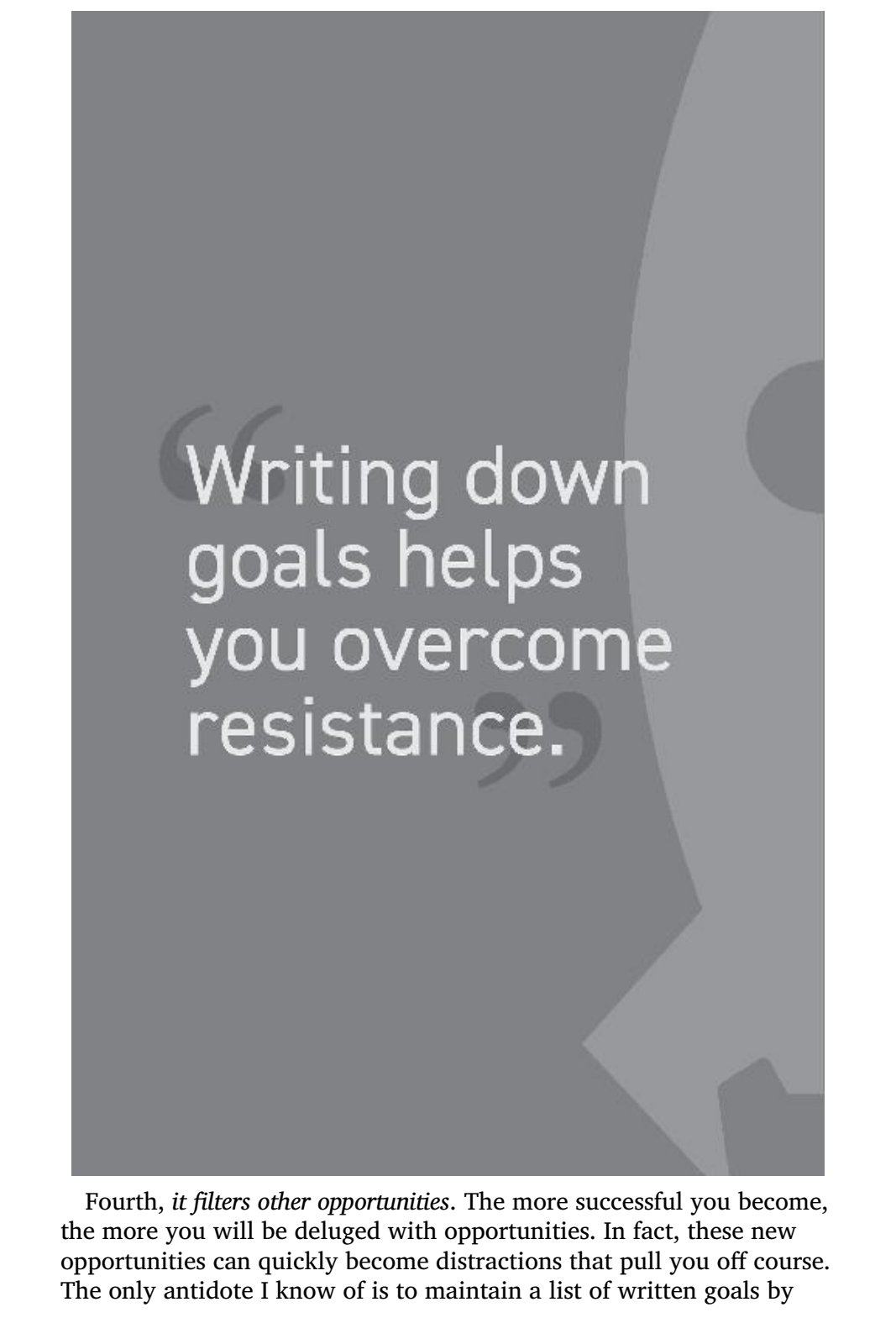
There's a commonly cited Ivy League study that supposedly shows writing down goals helps us achieve them. The problem is it's phony. And when people discover this, they sometimes think the benefits of writing down our goals are fake too.<sup>3</sup> But no.

Professor Gail Matthews of Dominican University of California conducted her own study not long ago and confirmed the power of writing down our goals. She recruited 267 entrepreneurs, executives, artists, healthcare professionals, educators, attorneys, and other professionals from several different countries. She divided them into five groups and tracked them over several weeks. Matthews discovered, among other things, the mere act of writing one's goals boosted achievement by 42 percent.<sup>4</sup> This gels with my own experience and that of people I coach.

Committing your goals to writing is not the end game. But it is foundational for success for at least five reasons. First, *it forces you to clarify what you want*. Imagine setting out on a trip with no particular destination in mind. How do you pack? What roads do you take? How do you know when you have arrived? Instead, you start by picking a destination. Clarity is a precondition for writing. (Ask any author suffering writer's block; they can't write because they're unsure what they're trying to say.)

Second, *writing down goals helps you overcome resistance*. When we go to the trouble of formulating and recording our goals, we're doing more than dreaming. We're also engaging our intellect. We're processing, self-checking, and analyzing. Every meaningful intention, dream, or goal encounters resistance. From the moment you set a goal, you will begin to feel it. But this emotional and intellectual engagement helps us identify deeply with our goals and forge resolve around our desires. I'll focus on this later in Step 4.

Third, *it motivates you to take action*. Writing your goals down is only the beginning. Articulating your intention is important, but it is not enough. You must execute your goals. You have to take action. I have found that writing down my goals and reviewing them regularly provokes me to take the next most important action.



“Writing down  
goals helps  
you overcome  
resistance.”

Fourth, *it filters other opportunities*. The more successful you become, the more you will be deluged with opportunities. In fact, these new opportunities can quickly become distractions that pull you off course. The only antidote I know of is to maintain a list of written goals by

which to evaluate these new opportunities. Establishing your priorities up front equips you to intentionally avoid what some call “shiny object syndrome.”

Fifth, *it enables you to see—and celebrate—your progress*. It is particularly difficult when you aren’t seeing progress. You feel like you are working yourself to death, going nowhere. But written goals can serve like mile markers on a highway. They enable you to see how far you have come and how far you need to go. They also provide an opportunity for celebration when you attain them. I’ll cover reasons 3–5 later in Step 5.

But to get the most from your written goals, as I said before, you need to formulate them to check certain boxes. And that’s where my seven-part framework comes in. You’ve probably heard of SMART goals. They have five different attributes, one for each letter of the SMART acronym (Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Time-bound). My coauthor Daniel Harkavy and I used this in our book *Living Forward*. General Electric pioneered this approach in the early 1980s. Others have modified and expanded it over the years, including me. The changes I’ve made to the system are based on insights from the best goal-achievement research available and are designed to drive results. Let’s dive into the seven attributes of my SMARTER system now.

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## Attribute 1: Specific

The first attribute of SMARTER goals is that they’re specific. Focus is power. You can drive the same amount of water through two pipes and create greater force in one of them just by reducing its diameter. That’s similar to what happens when we narrow our goals. What the studies show is that the tougher and more specific the goal, the more likely we are to engage our focus, creativity, intellect, and persistence. Vague goals don’t really inspire us. And it’s hard to know where to put what little effort and creativity we are willing to invest. Specific goals create a channel for our problem-solving skills, effort, and more.<sup>5</sup>

To formulate a SMARTER goal, you’ve got to identify exactly what you want to accomplish. For example, I could say “Write a book,” but that’s too vague. What’s the specific book that you want to write? In my case I would do better to write something like “Finish writing *Free to Focus*,” the title of my online productivity course and the working title of a book I’m writing. Here’s another example: “Learn photography.” Is that specific? No. What aspect of photography do you want to learn? A better goal would be “Complete Lynda.com’s



Photography 101 course.” That’s specific.

## SMARTER GOALS



We can make our goals more attainable by ensuring they check the right boxes. Write goals that are specific, measurable, actionable, risky, time-keyed, exciting, and relevant.

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### Attribute 2: Measurable

The second attribute of SMARTER goals is that they are measurable.

In other words, they have built-in criteria you can measure yourself against. This is important for two reasons. The first is the most obvious. How do you know that you've reached the goal? It's not very helpful or inspiring to say that you want to make more money this year than last. How much more? There's a big difference between a small cost of living raise and driving your commissions up 30 percent. Same with getting fit. Saying you want to exercise more often doesn't do much. It's not objective. Saying you plan to go to the gym four days a week is different. When the goal is measurable, we know the criteria for success.

The second reason is that you need to be able to measure yourself against the goal. An objective target allows you to set markers and milestones along the way. That means you can chart your progress, and half the fun of goals is in the progress we make. In fact, "We experience the strongest positive emotional response when we make progress on our most difficult goals," according to psychology professor Timothy A. Pynchyl.<sup>6</sup> Or as economist Richard Layard says, "Prod any happy person, and you will find a project."<sup>7</sup>

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## Attribute 3: Actionable

The third attribute of SMARTER goals is that they're actionable. Goals are fundamentally about what you're going to do. As a result, it's essential to get clear on the primary action when formulating your goals. How?

It may sound simplistic, but I find it's best to use a strong verb to prompt the action you want to take. You don't want something like *am*, or *be*, or *have*. You want a verb like *run*, *finish*, or *eliminate*. A couple of examples: "Be more consistent in blogging." Is that actionable? No. That's a state-of-being verb. But something like "Write two blog posts a week," that's actionable. It starts with the verb *write*, and it's clear and directive about the action. Here's another example: "Be more health conscious." Is that actionable? Not really. Instead you could say something like "Walk for thirty minutes five times a week." Much improved.



“Goals are  
fundamentally  
about what  
you’re going  
to do.”

The fourth attribute of SMARTER goals is that they're a bit risky. Hear me out. Normally we talk about setting goals that are realistic. That's usually what the R in SMART refers to. But if we start by asking what's realistic, we're likely to set the bar too low.

I introduced *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum J.R. earlier. When he started the process, he was making a six-figure income, but he was unfulfilled at work. He felt unrecognized for his contribution and no longer connected to the mission of the organization. He knew he needed a change. One response would have been to set a safe goal—say, addressing his problems with his employer. But J.R. didn't do that. "I said enough's enough," he remembered. "I literally went back to my employer at the time and I said, 'You know what? Take me off full-time salary.'" After that, he set a goal to start his own firm. J.R. had a wife and two kids under five, but he was confident he could make a go of his own business. And he did. He even paid off \$30,000 of debt he accrued when he quit his job.

The risk drove the results. Had J.R. gone the safe route, he would likely have accomplished far less. Why? "There is a linear relationship between the degree of goal difficulty and performance," as goal theorists Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham say. Looking at the results of almost 400 studies, they concluded, "The performance of participants with the highest goals was over 250% higher than those with the easiest goals."<sup>8</sup> We rise to a challenge, but we lay back when it's easy.

Still, safe goals are a constant temptation for us. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman has done pioneering research on risk aversion. "We are driven more strongly to avoid losses than achieve gains," he says. "The aversion to failure of not reaching the goal is much stronger than the desire to achieve it."<sup>9</sup> For some that bias is stronger than others, and it has tremendous upsides—for instance, keeping us out of trouble. But it can disserve us when we set goals, especially if we're unaware of its effect on us. Because failing feels like losing, we're tempted to set small goals we can easily reach in the name of being "realistic." We're also likely to slack off once we've reached those small goals.

I'm not saying everyone should quit their job or burn the ships. But by focusing on what's supposedly realistic, we can inadvertently trigger our natural impulse to avoid loss and end up accomplishing less than we otherwise might have. I'm not saying we should set goals that are crazy. I am saying we should set goals that stretch and challenge us. I'll have more to say on this later in chapter 9.

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## Attribute 5: Time-keyed

The fifth attribute of SMARTER goals is that they're time-keyed. This could be a deadline, frequency, or a time trigger. For example, if I just had the goal "Read more," it's missing a sense of urgency. It could happen over the next ten years. It could happen over the next twenty years. Even if I assume it's a New Year's resolution so it means sometime *this year*, it's still just out there somewhere. I can put it off and stop thinking about it. But when I say I want to read two books each month, I've not only created a challenge but also focus. Deadlines demand attention and spur action. I'd better get in motion because the clock is ticking.

Here's another example: "Acquire five new design clients." By when? "Acquire five new design clients by December 31." That's better. But here's a warning: As you're thinking about assigning deadlines, don't make them all December 31.

Distant deadlines discourage action. You'll think, "I have so much time. It's not due for another ten or twelve months." Effort dissipates to fill time. But the reverse is also true. Short time horizons concentrate our effort. The tighter the deadline, the more productive you can be. A study by Locke and Latham found that workers in one field experiment were able to keep production at 100 percent even when their time was cut by 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> The new deadline created huge gains in productivity—and we can experience the same sort of gains in our personal and private lives when we set near-term goals, leaving more margin for other pursuits.

The main thing to watch is your bandwidth. I recommend setting seven to ten goals per year—but only two or three major deadlines per quarter. Any more than that and your focus will suffer along with your results.

Deadlines are essential for achievement goals. But what about habit goals? I'll explain more about the differences between these two kinds of goals in the next chapter, but for now we can focus on different kinds of time keys. Deadlines don't make sense with ongoing activities. But deadlines aren't the only way to key activity to time. If we use frequency statements and time triggers we can actually spur the habits we want to cultivate. Saying "Exercise more this year" is a recipe for inaction. But saying "Run for thirty minutes at the park every weekday morning at 7 a.m." sets you up to win. Not only does it say what kind of exercise and where you're going to do it, not only does it say for how long, it also tells us exactly when you're going to do it.

Time keys for habit goals create external cues that trigger action. And they work. After telling study participants about the dangers of

heart disease, researchers in the UK recommended exercise as a way to prevent it. On their own, participants intended to work out but usually forgot. They had a less than 40 percent success rate. I get it. Life's busy. But some were asked to bake a time trigger into their goal. Their success rate was better than 90 percent.<sup>11</sup> The time key helped drive the behavior they wanted to see. I'll show you how you can leverage Activation Triggers like these in Step 5.

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## Attribute 6: Exciting

The sixth attribute of SMARTER goals is that they're exciting. They inspire you, in other words. Researchers say that we stand a better chance of reaching our goals if we are internally motivated to do so. External motivations might work for a while, but if we're not getting something intrinsic from the goal, we'll lose interest.

That was a challenge James experienced with his prior job. Others set the goals he pursued. "That was a big problem for me," he said. "I was so caught up with everyone else designing goals for me. I never took the time to design them for myself." It was a game changer for him when he finally determined to take his destiny into his own hands. "The biggest difference for me is they no longer were overwhelming goals. They were inspiring goals. When I'm inspired, I want to go." The change came down to one thing: he personally set goals that excited him.

Another *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* student struggled with a goal she set of getting her accounting caught up in her small business. Important? Yes. Inspiring? Not for her. As a result she struggled to maintain momentum. We all do.

Ayelet Fishbach and Kaitlin Woolley of the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business researched New Year's resolutions. They first asked people to rate how much they enjoyed the resolutions they had set and then followed up a couple months later. Enjoyment turned out to be a key predictor of success. But as Alice G. Walton reported in the *Chicago Booth Review*, "That's not how people typically choose their goals—they choose ones they feel are important. Fishbach says it's fine to go ahead and set goals that feel important, but don't compromise on pleasure entirely. 'Don't choose a New Year's resolution you don't enjoy doing.' You'll be setting yourself up for failure." Instead, she says, "Tap into your intrinsic motivation."<sup>12</sup>

Go with what excites you. If you don't find your goals personally compelling, you won't have the motivation to push through when things get tough or tedious. This is where you've got to be honest with

yourself. Ask, “Does this goal inspire me?” Or, “Does it engage my heart? Am I willing to work hard to make it happen?” You might even ask if you find it fun; I usually do for at least some of my goals each year. All of these questions get at something we’ll cover in the next step—finding your why. Remember, we’re setting risky goals. We’re going to be tempted to quit at some point. Only an exciting goal can access the internal motivation you need to stay the course and achieve your goal.

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## Attribute 7: Relevant

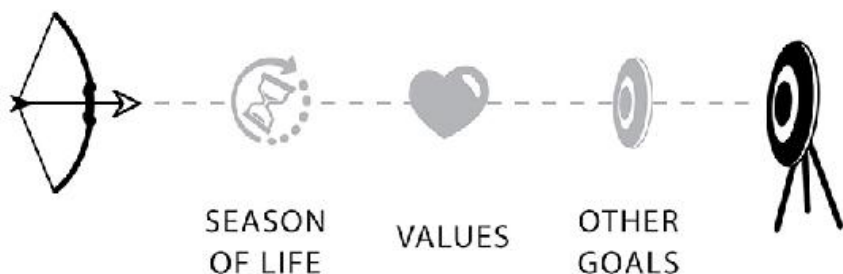
That brings us to the seventh and final attribute of SMARTER goals. Effective goals are relevant to your life. This is about alignment, and it comes at the end of the list because it’s a good way to gut-check your goals before committing to them. Frankly, this is the main area where GM went wrong. But we can all stumble on this point if we’re not careful.

If we’re going to succeed, we need goals that align with the legitimate demands and needs of our lives. Are you a working parent with young kids? Your goals will look much different than an empty nester or an undergrad. Depending on your circumstances, going to med school might not be in the cards right now. Pursuing a new weekend-gobbling hobby might put unwanted strain on your family. You need to set goals that are relevant to your actual circumstances and true interests.

You also need goals that align with your values. This should be obvious, but sometimes we feel outside pressure to set goals that go against the core of who we are. The pressure could be social, professional, whatever. But you need to resist the temptation to gear your performance for others—especially if it somehow goes against your values.

Finally, you need goals that align amongst themselves. They must have harmony together as a whole. Setting multiple conflicting goals will only create friction and frustration. If we’re working against ourselves, we’ll experience more heartburn than progress. That goes for setting too many goals in general.

# NEW GOALS SHOULD ALIGN WITH YOUR



When a goal is relevant to our season of life, personal values, and our other goals, we improve our odds for success.

At the start of his memoir *The To-Do List*, journalist Mike Gayle has a moment of reflection. It's his thirty-sixth birthday, and he's plagued by all the things he has yet to accomplish with his life. So he sets some goals—1,277 to be exact. Out of that list he achieved 1,269, but the comedy of the story is the craziness his wife must endure in the process.<sup>13</sup> As far as I'm concerned, reading a farce is far better than living one. Instead, limit yourself to seven to ten goals that align with your life, your values, and your ambitions.

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## Goals of Your Own

To summarize, SMARTER goals are specific, measurable, actionable, risky, time-keyed, exciting, and relevant. And now you're ready to start designing some of your own. How do you get started? I recommend you begin by pulling up your LifeScore Assessment results. If you haven't taken the assessment yet, take a moment to do so. You can find it at [BestYearEver.me/lifescore](https://BestYearEver.me/lifescore). It only requires about ten minutes. Your LifeScore will help you craft a set of goals that are aligned with your personal growth path.

Avoid setting more than seven to ten goals. Any more and you'll dilute your efforts and suffer distraction. Any less and you might not stretch yourself enough. I also recommend setting a few per quarter so you can space your effort more or less evenly throughout the year.

As I've mentioned before, you'll want to include goals from several different LifeScore domains. I find that people are accustomed to





best year ever.

## SMARTER GOAL-SETTING TEMPLATES



### FOR ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

1

ACTIONABLE

SPECIFIC, MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT

2

ACTIONABLE

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

SPECIFIC

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT

3

ACTIONABLE

SPECIFIC

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT



### FOR HABIT GOALS

4

ACTIONABLE

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

SPECIFIC

TIME-KEYED

TIME TRIGGER

STARTING DATE

STREAK TARGET

RELEVANT

## SMARTER GOAL-SETTING TEMPLATES



### FOR ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

1

Run

the Country Music Half Marathon

by April 2<sup>nd</sup>

ACTIONABLE

SPECIFIC, MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT

2

Read

50

business books

by December 31

ACTIONABLE

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

SPECIFIC

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT

3

Lower

my golf handicap

from 22 to 18

by November 30

ACTIONABLE

SPECIFIC

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

TIME-KEYED

RELEVANT



### FOR HABIT GOALS

4

Walk

two miles

at Pinkerton Park

M-W-F

ACTIONABLE

MEASURABLE, RISKY & EXCITING

SPECIFIC

TIME-KEYED

at 6:00 am

starting June 1

for 12 weeks

TIME TRIGGER

STARTING DATE

STREAK TARGET

RELEVANT

## Achievements and Habits Work Together

The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don't define them.

DENIS WATLEY

Suzanne is in the best shape of her life. She began running regularly in her thirties and completed her first marathon a few years later. Looking for a challenging, inspiring goal when she turned forty, she decided to run fifty marathons in fifty states by her fiftieth birthday. She calls it her *50/50x50 Challenge*, and she's well on her way. Now forty-four, she's already checked twenty states off her list.

Richard retired from active Air Force duty five years ago and now teaches history at his local community college. After noticing students lacked both critical thinking and social skills necessary for leadership, he met with his advisory board on the problem. Agreeing on the need, the board asked him to create a new leadership curriculum in time for the fall semester. Richard took a sabbatical to work on the project, finished over the summer, and started teaching the new course on schedule.

When Tom worked out a proprietary color-pairing system for his interior-decorating business, his partner Isabelle had an idea. She found a developer who helped them create a mobile app that used phone or tablet cameras to match colors and suggest options for coordinating palettes. It took several months to work out the kinks. But after input from beta users, they set a March 1 launch date. They're on track to beat it by two weeks.

Each of these hypotheticals—*50/50x50*, the leadership curriculum, and the app launch—represent one-time accomplishments. You'll recognize the key features. They have a clear, definable scope and time frame for completion. These are called achievement goals. But there's another kind of goal we also need to consider.

Bill and Nancy have an awesome marriage. It's not just that they were lucky and married the right person. It's that they have intentionally cultivated intimacy. As simple as it sounds, they have gone on a date night every week for more than two decades. This habit has provided a context in which they can have deep, meaningful conversations about the things that matter most.

Spencer is healthy and fit. Whenever he goes in for his annual physical, his doctor is amazed. He has continued to improve for each of the last five years. The surprising thing is that Spencer just turned sixty last year. But his health is not an accident. It all started when he began to cultivate the habit of strength training four days a week.

Larissa has built a seven-figure business in just three years. You might be tempted to write off her success to the fact that she stumbled onto a great idea at exactly the right time. Certainly, that played a role. But if you asked her the secret to her success, she would chalk it up to her habit of making five sales calls every single week.

Unlike the first three examples, these last three don't have a defined scope or limited time frame. Instead, they represent ongoing activity. These are called habit goals. Both achievement and habit goals can help us design the future we want, especially if we can get the right mix and leverage their differences.



“Both  
achievement  
and habit  
goals can help  
us design  
the future we  
want.”

As the examples above illustrate, achievement goals are focused on one-time accomplishments. They might target paying off your credit cards, hitting a financial benchmark, or finishing writing a novel. It's essential that achievement goals include deadlines.

Habit goals, on the other hand, involve regular, ongoing activity, such as a daily meditation practice, a monthly coffee date with a friend, or walking each day after lunch. There's no deadline because you're not trying to accomplish just one thing. You're trying to maintain a practice. Instead, there's a start date, which triggers initiation. Look at the three corresponding achievement and habit examples in the following list for quick comparison.

#### ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

Run my first half marathon by June 1.

Increase sales revenue 20% by the close of the third quarter.

Read 50 books this year by December 31.

#### HABIT GOALS

Run 3 miles on weekdays at 7, starting January 15.

Call 4 new client prospects each week, beginning March 1.

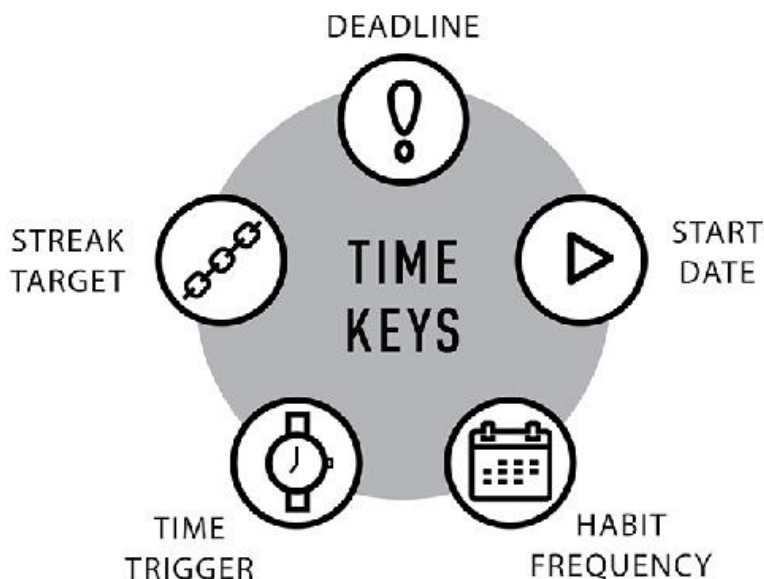
Read 45 minutes each evening at 8 p.m., beginning immediately.

Following the SMARTER framework, the achievement goals in the table are specific, measurable, and have a time key, all of which drive focus and effort. When the deadline is up, we know if we've achieved the goal or not.

The habit goals listed also follow the SMARTER framework. That's essential for knowing what activity we are trying to maintain and the desired frequency. While habit goals do not include deadlines, the most effective habit goals have four time keys:

1. *Start date.* This is when you intend to begin installing this habit.
2. *Habit frequency.* This is how often you will observe this habit. It could be daily, specific days of the week, weekly, monthly, and so on.
3. *Time trigger.* This is when you want to do the habit. It could be a specific time each day, week, and so on. This makes it easier to become consistent if you can do the habit at the same time.
4. *Streak target.* This is how many times in a row you must do the habit before you can consider it installed—that is, once the activity becomes second nature. With most habit goals, you can stop focusing on them once that happens.

The risk factor comes from maintaining your streak. Installing a habit takes a period of time, and it might be longer than you think. I'll come back to this idea in Step 4. The sample habit goal templates in the back of the book not only have those time keys baked in but also a streak tracker to check off your progress.



Time keys are essential for goal attainment. Deadlines work best for achievement goals. For habit goals, try combining a start date, habit frequency, time trigger, and a streak target.

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## Which Works Best?

If you're looking to create seven to ten goals, you should probably have a mix of both achievement and habit goals. The trick is to know when and how to use them. An achievement goal works for any project with a definable scope or limited time frame. Let's say you want to increase your income. You can put some definition on that and set yourself a deadline. You could set an achievement goal like this: "Increase sales commissions by 20 percent by the end of the fiscal year." Or let's say you want to launch a new business. You can set an achievement goal like this: "Launch consultancy by June 1."

Meanwhile, a habit goal works for desires without a definable scope or limited time frame. Let's say you want to grow closer to God or become more spiritual. That's not a one-time accomplishment; that reflects an ongoing reality. You could set a habit goal like this: "Spend

20 minutes a day in Bible reading and prayer, 5 days a week at 6:00 a.m., beginning January 1, and do it for 70 days in a row.” Or let’s say you want to develop more intimacy with your spouse. You could set a habit goal like this: “Take my spouse out for dinner and an evening of conversation, once per week, on Friday nights at 6:00 p.m., beginning March 1, and do it for 52 weeks straight.”

Another way to use habit goals is as a means to completing an achievement goal. Let’s say, for example, you want to write a 50,000-word book by June 30. You could identify several next steps, or you could focus on simply installing a writing habit. For example, “Write 500 words a day, 5 days a week at 6:00 a.m., beginning on February 1, and do it for 100 days straight.” Or let’s say you want to increase your revenue by 30 percent before year end. You could identify several next steps, or (again) you could focus on simply installing a habit. Remember the example of Larissa? To reach your achievement goal, you could set the following habit goal: “Make 5 sales calls each week to qualified leads, beginning January 1, and do it for 52 weeks.”

Different goals work for different people, and you can tailor your commitments to meet your personal emotional and physical needs. For some people, an achievement goal around health is the last thing they need. For some, it provides the motivation to get moving. You just need to find what works for you. It might be obvious to you or you might need to experiment and try out both to land on the best path.

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## **The Right Mix for You**

What you’re looking for is the mix of achievement goals and habit goals that’s right for you. Before we move on to the next step and discuss staying motivated for the long haul, I want to revisit the subject of risk and how to use it to help us reach our goals.



## Seriously, Risk Is Your Friend

By reaching for what appears to be impossible, we often actually do the impossible; and even when we don't quite make it, we inevitably wind up doing much better than we would have done.

JACK WELCH

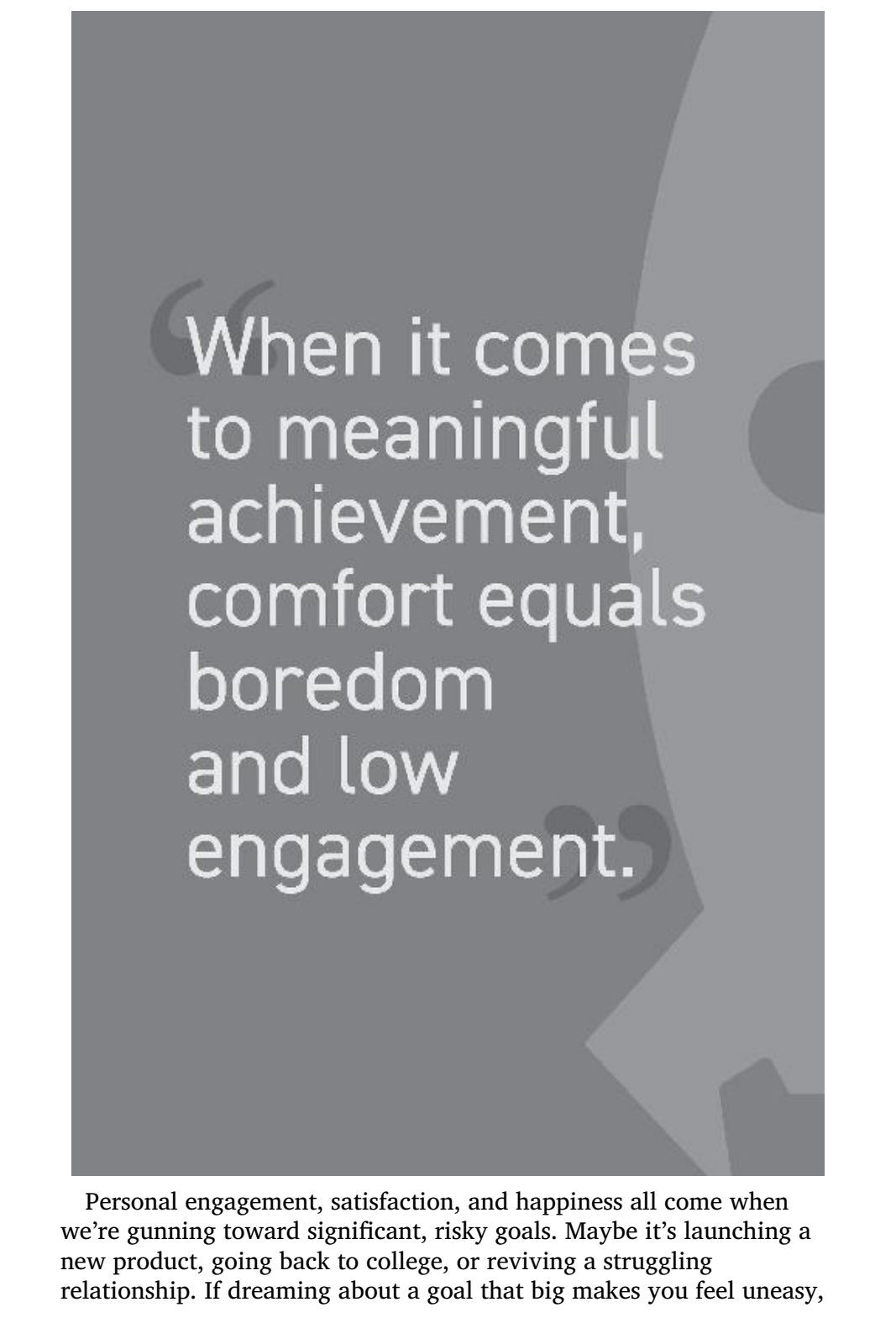
Most of us have heard the popular story of the first marathon. After the Athenians defeated Persian invaders at the battle of Marathon in 490 BC, a messenger ran twenty-six miles to share the exciting news. But in his book *The Road to Sparta*, ultramarathoner Dean Karnazes shares the real story, and it's far more compelling. The runner, whose name was Pheidippides, actually ran more than 150 miles all the way from Athens to Sparta—and then back again—before the battle. And Karnazes says the same runner might have run the final stretch after the victory at Marathon for a total of more than 325 miles!

That might sound far-fetched, but Karnazes then recounts the story of a British Air Force commander named John Foden. In 1982 he led a small group who ran the distance from Athens to Sparta in under thirty-five hours. A year later Foden cofounded a 153-mile race retracing his steps. It's called the Spartathlon.

Karnazes ran it in 2014. As an ultramarathoner, he'd already run 350 miles nonstop. But the Spartathlon held mammoth challenges of its own, including Karnazes's determination to run the distance with only the foods Pheidippides would have eaten: olives, figs, and cured meats.<sup>1</sup> Why would a person willingly go through something like that? "Western culture has things a little backwards right now," Karnazes once told *Outside* magazine. "We think that if we had every comfort available to us, we'd be happy. We equate comfort with happiness. And now we're so comfortable we're miserable. There's no struggle in our lives. No sense of adventure."<sup>2</sup> That observation applies to all of life, especially our goals. When it comes to meaningful achievement, comfort equals boredom and low engagement.

When I first heard about Karnazes several years ago, I was so

inspired I made a commitment to run my first-ever half marathon. I've run several since, though it's never easy. And that's good. You and I should embrace discomfort for at least three reasons, whether we deliberately choose to or it simply happens to us. First, comfort is overrated. It doesn't lead to happiness. It often leads to self-absorption and discontent. Second, discomfort is a catalyst for growth. It makes us yearn for something more. It forces us to change, stretch, and adapt. Third, discomfort signals progress. When you push yourself to grow, you will experience discomfort, but there's profit in the pain.



“When it comes  
to meaningful  
achievement,  
comfort equals  
boredom  
and low  
engagement.”

Personal engagement, satisfaction, and happiness all come when we're gunning toward significant, risky goals. Maybe it's launching a new product, going back to college, or reviving a struggling relationship. If dreaming about a goal that big makes you feel uneasy,

you're on the right track. How can you confirm you're heading the right direction? I like to find out where someone's goals relate to three specific zones. I use this same technique when evaluating my own goals. The three zones are the Comfort Zone, the Discomfort Zone, and the Delusional Zone.

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## The Comfort Zone

We all have dreams for a better future. We set goals for improving our health, our family and friendships, our finances, our work lives, and more. When we start dreaming about the future, however, our aspirations can feel too fragile and too far away. We jump ahead of ourselves and start worrying about *how* we're going to achieve those goals. Then, because we let the *how* overshadow the *what*, we downgrade our aspiration. We don't see how we can accomplish more, so we throttle back our vision, convinced our goals must be "reasonable" or "realistic." We aim low. We settle for less. And what we expect becomes our new reality.

But the old adage is true. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* The Chicago architect Daniel Burnham said it this way in 1907: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work."<sup>3</sup> The science backs him up. Goal researchers have documented a strong, direct relationship between the difficulty of our goals and the likelihood we'll achieve them—not to mention greater motivation, creativity, and satisfaction.

For a goal to matter, it has to stretch us. That means it has to stand somewhere outside our Comfort Zone. If you know exactly how to attain the goal, it's probably not far enough. I recently watched a documentary about amateur ultramarathoners who were running more than six hundred miles across four different deserts.<sup>4</sup> One of the runners, who had done only a few small races before, decided to sign up. What's instructive is why. He'd never done anything like that before, he said, but he knew he'd figure it out once he committed. I'm not saying you need to sign up to run hundreds of miles in four of the world's most inhospitable places. But if you have all the financial, emotional, and physical resources you need right now to accomplish your goal—in other words, if you can easily imagine completing the challenge—it's probably not challenging enough to be compelling.

We know from the science of goal setting that rising to the inherent risk of a goal creates huge emotional gains for us. "When goals are set too low, people often achieve them, but subsequent motivation and

energy levels typically flag, and the goals are usually not exceeded by very much,” according to Steve Kerr and Douglas LePelley of Chancellor University. But, they say, “difficult goals are far more likely to generate sustained enthusiasm and higher levels of performance.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, we get more out if we put more in.

Let’s say you’re the sales manager of a small manufacturing plant. You’ve been growing at 5 percent a year, and this year you’re going to set your growth goal at 6 percent. Is that going to heighten performance, engage your creativity, or up your enthusiasm? No way. Small goals just aren’t very compelling. If we want to win, we need to get beyond our natural urge to play it safe, jump outside our comfort zones, and set some risky goals. Now imagine if that growth goal was more like 20 percent. Delivering that result will require more from you than you currently know how to manage. That’s when growth happens.

Or take a personal instead of a professional example. If you’ve run a 5K and you want to stretch to a 10K, maybe that’s really not the best goal. What about pushing for a half marathon? The idea with a risky goal is to leap out of your Comfort Zone and into your Discomfort Zone. Playing it safe won’t reap the same kind of rewards.

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## The Discomfort Zone

You’ve probably already experienced Discomfort Zone benefits to some extent before. Maybe it was learning a new skill, meeting a new person, or taking on a challenge you’d never done. We don’t often enjoy these things when they are happening, but looking back, we have to admit: the really important stuff of life happens outside your Comfort Zone. This is where the growth happens, where the solutions are, where fulfillment resides. But instead of encountering this retrospectively, we can engineer these experiences by intentionally embracing goals with greater levels of risk baked in.

Jack Welch calls this “bullet train thinking.” He took the name from a revolution in Japanese transit. Traveling by rail from Tokyo to Osaka once took more than six hours. This slowed down business, and executives wanted the time cut. But they didn’t establish “realistic” reductions in time, say, bringing the trip under six hours. Instead, they wanted *to cut it in half*. To meet the goal, engineers scrapped conventional solutions, rethought the entire problem, and revolutionized Japanese transit in the process.<sup>6</sup>

For a goal to be meaningful, its attainment should lie in the Discomfort Zone. You’ll know you’re there when you start feeling

emotions we normally consider negative: fear, uncertainty, and doubt. When rightly understood, these supposedly negative emotions work like indicator lights telling us we've arrived. When we don't see the path, or we're unsure about having what it takes to reach the goal, then we're closing in on a goal worth trying for.

That looks different for everyone, of course. I've been working with a personal trainer for a while now. The other day my team and I were shooting video for a new project. Earlier that morning my trainer put me through a rigorous leg workout. It shredded me. And I was really feeling it as I was standing there in front of the camera. But, honestly, I felt great. The discomfort tells me I'm making progress and becoming stronger. Instead of shrinking from discomfort, I let it guide me toward accomplishment. Most people shrink back when they feel negative emotions. Don't. They might just be markers you're on the right path.

You need to be smart about this. For instance, in the business environment there's a big difference between setting bold goals and managing up. It might be unwise to publicly stand for a certain goal that's on your personal goal list. There's nothing wrong with having a public number that's in your Comfort Zone and your personal stretch goal that's beyond it. But how do you know if your goal is challenging or just crazy? There is also a difference between discomfort and delusion.

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## The Delusional Zone

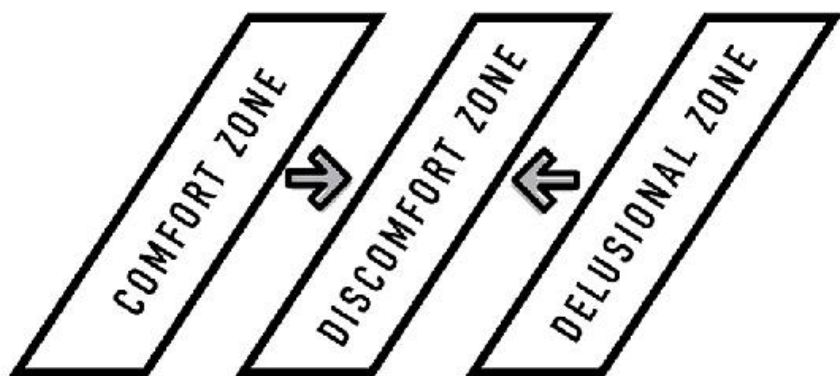
When General Motors blew its 29 percent goal and damaged its viability as a company, many used it as a warning about the danger of goal setting. They said goal setting doesn't work, or that it causes more problems than it solves. But GM didn't fail because it set a challenging goal. It failed because it wandered into the Delusional Zone.

The goal encouraged tunnel vision and reckless strategies. GM was so focused on hitting 29 percent, it lost track of the rest of its business and tried hitting the goal using strategies that ultimately undercut its financial health. Relevancy, as we discussed in the SMARTER framework, can prevent this kind of self-destructive goal seeking. Some goals are simply impossible and fail to align with the rest of our priorities. They don't inspire; they ensure failure.

We can all step into the Delusional Zone if we're not careful. Me thinking I could play on the PGA senior tour, for instance—that's delusional. Ask anyone who's ever played golf with me. What about

the guy who decided to run across four deserts? That sounds delusional, right? It does until you consider the fact that he had always been fairly athletic, was highly determined, and was running with a close-knit group of supportive fellow travelers.

What about you? How can you tell you're veering into crazy town? Sometimes it's just math. In his one-day EntreLeadership event I heard Dave Ramsey mention a salesperson who set a goal of calling a huge number of new leads in a certain period of time. Did Ramsey praise him for his bold stand? Nope. He called foul. Ramsey showed the salesperson there wasn't enough available time in the week to accomplish the goal. The guy had lunged right over the Discomfort Zone into the Delusional Zone.



Risky goals are a must. That means discomfort is a positive indicator. When you set goals, avoid staying in your Comfort Zone. Be sure to avoid the Delusional Zone too.

Other times talking with a spouse or someone close to you can help. We're rarely as good at identifying our blind spots as others. They can sometimes see how a goal is missing the relevancy we think it has.

And here's a warning. You don't need one crazy leap to land in the Delusional Zone. Sometimes we can drift there with the accumulated demands of multiple goals. I see this when people plan major deadlines simultaneously or stack up projects one after another without enough margin. You know what happens next. It's a train wreck just waiting to happen.

Goals in the Discomfort Zone challenge us and summon our best performance. Goals in the Delusional Zone invite defeat and merely leave us frustrated and discouraged. What I like to do is set a goal that's almost delusional and then dial it back a few clicks. Then I land somewhere in my Discomfort Zone.

## Preparing for the Journey

I'd like to return to the story of *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum Natalee. Before moving with her family to a new city, she launched an online branding and marketing consultancy. She had started another business once before and was ready to do it again.

Natalee was able to turn a previous professional relationship into her first client, but getting traction was hard at first. "I knew I wanted to continue to grow my business and I wanted to do something entrepreneurial," she said. But it wasn't easy with the move and young kids. Despite the challenges and uncertainty, she ventured out two years ago and set a goal to grow her business. The journey had its bumps and turns, but she figured it out along the way and took her business from one client to six. "I love that I'm being an entrepreneur," she said. "It's so liberating to do something I've always dreamed of doing. I'm very proud of the fact that I've gone out and I've done that. I've created value in the world."

Running her own business began as a dream. Then it became a daunting goal. After that it was her day job. This year she set the goal of creating \$10,000 in revenue from her business in one month. It was a stretch, and she admitted she thought it was close to the Delusional Zone. "I thought for sure it would take me till December," she said. But no. She actually managed it by March 30. "I literally am blown away," she said. "Limiting belief: crushed."

Natalee directly benefited from the performance boost of challenging goals. And you can too. Your best year ever lives somewhere beyond your Comfort Zone. If that's true, and I believe it is, how can you prepare for the negative emotions that are sure to hit you during the journey? Let me suggest four ways.

First, *acknowledge the value*. We move toward what we esteem. The first step is simply to confess that getting out of your Comfort Zone is a good thing. This is about trading your limiting belief for a liberating truth. Say it out loud if you need to: "Getting out of my Comfort Zone is good for me!" Remember, unless you do so, you won't experience the growth you want, the solution you need, or the fulfillment you desire. Playing it safe is not that safe.

Second, *lean into the experience*. So many people shrink back whenever they experience pain. The problem is that this can become a habit—or worse, a way of life. Instead, embrace the discomfort. Move toward it. "What I've found is that I'm never more alive than when I'm pushing and I'm in pain, and I'm struggling for high achievement," says Karnazes. "In that struggle I think there's a magic."<sup>7</sup> This is an important step in accomplishing anything significant. You have to go



through the realm of discomfort to get what you want in life.



“Playing it safe  
is not that  
safe.”

Third, *notice your fear*. If you feel anxiety, trepidation, or uncertainty, that's normal. But you don't have to be controlled by it. Yes, fear can signal danger. But it can also indicate you're on your

way to a breakthrough. I met a BASE jumper in Switzerland a few years ago. He told me he feels almost unbearable fear every time he jumps. He's consumed with it the moment his feet leave the mountain until his chute opens several seconds later. Why? "Maybe today's the day my chute won't open," he thinks. Despite his fear, however, the prize is greater than the worry. When the negative emotions well up, which they invariably do, he separates himself from them, minimizes them to focus on his jump, and then goes. Often, the ability to push through fear is the only thing that separates those who succeed from those who fail.

Fourth, *don't overthink it*. This is my biggest temptation. I want to know the entire path. I want a map to the destination. Alas, I rarely get one. But that's okay. All you really need is clarity for the next step. When you get it, take the next step in faith, believing you will be given the light you need to take the next one.

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## Growth in the Journey

If you are out to accomplish significant things in your life, you are going to be spending a lot of time outside your Comfort Zone. You might as well get the most out of it. You can either be comfortable and stagnate or stretch yourself—become uncomfortable—and grow. You may think that comfort leads to happiness. It doesn't. Happiness comes from growth and feeling like you are making progress.

As we try to set risky goals, it's important to remember what goals are for in the first place. They are about getting things done, yes. But it's more than that. A goal is not just about what you accomplish. It's about what you become. Goals are about growing. A good goal causes us to grow and mature. That's because every goal is about the journey as much as—even more than—the destination. And that's exactly why setting goals outside the Comfort Zone is so important.

## STEP 3

# ACTION PLAN



## 1. Set Your Goals

Set seven to ten goals you want to achieve for the year.  
Make them SMARTER:

Specific  
Measurable  
Actionable  
Risky  
Time-keyed  
Exciting  
Relevant

Make sure you focus on the Life Domains where you need to see improvement. List just a few per quarter; that way you can concentrate your attention and keep a steady pace throughout the year.

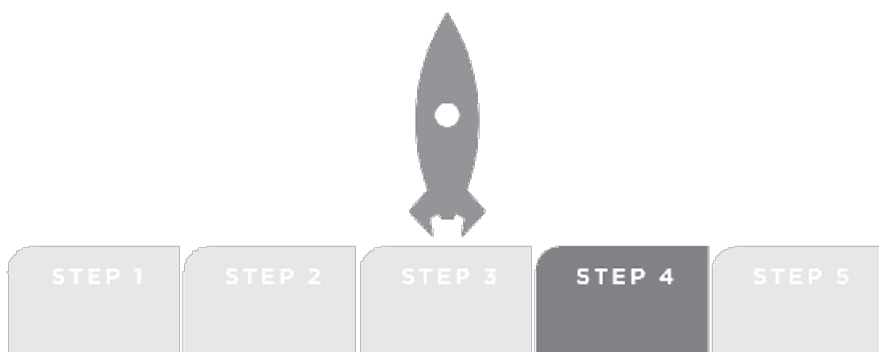
## 2. Decide on the Right Mix of Achievements and Habits

Achievement goals represent one-time accomplishments. Habit goals represent new regular, ongoing activity. Both are helpful for designing your best year ever, but you need to decide on the right balance for your individual needs. The only right answer is the one that works for you.

### 3. Set Goals in the Discomfort Zone

The best things in life usually happen when we stretch ourselves and grow. That's definitely true for our designing our best year ever. But it runs counter to our instincts, doesn't it? Follow these four steps to overcome the resistance:

1. Acknowledge the value of getting outside your Comfort Zone. It all starts with a shift in your thinking. Once you accept the value of discomfort, it's a lot easier going forward.
2. Lean into the experience. Most of the resistance is in our minds, but we need more than a shift in thinking. By leaning in, we're also shifting our wills.
3. Notice your fear. Negative emotions are sure to well up. Don't ignore them. Instead, objectify them and compare the feelings to what you want to accomplish. Is the reward greater than the fear?
4. Don't overthink it. Analysis paralysis is real. But you don't need to see the end from the beginning or know exactly how a goal will play out. All you need is clarity on your next step.



## Find Your Why

In his book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, Donald Miller talks about crossing a stretch of water—not just leaving shore and arriving at the other side, but also “the hard work of the middle.”<sup>1</sup> It’s a metaphor for anything meaningful we undertake. Pushing off gives us the rush of anticipation and progress. But the anticipation fades and the progress seems to slow. Pretty soon we’re in the messy middle, doubting if we have the strength to make it to the other side—or maybe why we started in the first place.

In the last step we talked about my seven-part SMARTER framework for writing powerful, effective goals. It’s critical to make them specific, measurable, actionable, a little bit risky, time-keyed, exciting, and relevant to your actual circumstances. Step 4 is about the importance of identifying and connecting with the motivations for each of your goals.

This is important because inevitably you’re going to find yourself in the messy middle. It’s part of every big dream, every goal, every attempt to improve. Sometimes we think if we just plan better, we can avoid the pain and breeze through to the finish. But it almost never happens that way. The answer is leveraging your motivations. It will give you the drive and stamina to finish when the going gets tough and you want to quit.

## Your What Needs a Why

It all comes down to motivation. If you really want to do something, you will work hard for it.

SIR EDMUND HILLARY

It happens to me several times a week. I want to quit. Just the other day, I wanted to quit my run halfway into it. After the first mile my lazy self asked, “Why can’t we just walk?” For a while, the voice got louder with each step. But if it’s not running, it is something else: my marriage, my business, my friendships, even God. This is just the nature of life. The temptation to quit is a recurring theme. And if the voices in our heads were not enough trouble, the voices in our culture also urge us to “throw in the towel,” “make a change,” or “take it easy on yourself.” What these same voices fail to tell you is that there is a distinction between the dream and the work required to obtain it.

“Everybody looks good at the starting line,” sings Americana artist Paul Thorn. Starting is simple. It’s progress that’s tough. The hill is steeper than you thought. The road is longer than you assumed. You are not sure you have what it takes to finish. I have been in this spot many times. I faced it in running every half marathon. I’ve seen it in my career and as an entrepreneur. I’ve even experienced it in my marriage and in parenting. Especially parenting.

When we begin a project there’s all kinds of enthusiasm. We’re energized by that surge of excitement that comes from novelty and our own creativity. But that surge is like starter fluid; it’s not the fuel that will see us through the journey. That’s why so many New Year’s resolutions only make it a few weeks. To go the distance with our goals, we need something stronger.

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## The Myth of Fun, Fast, and Easy

Everything important requires work, and sometimes there is a long arc between the dream and its realization. Some of us are more prepared to accept this than others. In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown blames our reluctance on the culture of fun, fast, and easy.<sup>1</sup> We are conditioned to want results now—tomorrow at the very latest. We want it without expending a lot of effort. And of course, we must have fun doing it; otherwise, we are on to the next thing. But other than a few lucky exceptions, most payoffs are not immediate.

Unmet by the instant success we expect, we can lose heart and give up. I've seen this a hundred times in a dozen contexts:

- The spouse who is worn down after several years of marriage and is ready to walk away
- The parent who is struggling with an out-of-touch teenager and feels like giving up
- The entrepreneur who has invested months, maybe years, into a new initiative but loses heart for lack of traction
- The author who is excited about a new idea but grinds to a halt four months into writing the book
- The employee who fails to hit revenue goals and starts checking out
- The leader who is struggling to turn around a business unit and finally throws up her hands

I have personal examples galore, and I'm sure you do as well. The truth is that anything worth doing isn't all fun, it's almost never fast, and it certainly isn't easy. Take fitness. I knew I needed more core strength; it's one of the keys for balance and endurance, especially in the second half of life. But I wasn't making any progress. I started half a dozen times but couldn't gain any momentum, so I finally hired a fitness trainer. It's been tough. My trainer constantly pushes me out of my Comfort Zone. And progress seems slow at my age.

Early on I was frequently tempted to quit. I stuck it out, though, and I did so by leveraging five elements. The first is *perspective*. Look at the careers of great leaders, innovators, or athletes. Was it an instant shot to the top with no setbacks for any of them? Not usually. Obstacles, reversals, and even failures are all part of their success path. That's true for everyone. We can't bank on being the exception—that's just an illusion guaranteed to derail and disappoint us even more than the problems we're facing.

Second, *a new frame*. As we discussed earlier, our expectations shape our experience. When we reframe our frustrations, we can usually find a foothold for forward momentum. Instead of letting the worst picture

prevail, I ask myself empowering questions to help me push past the difficulty I face. What, for instance, could this obstacle make possible? How can I grow in this situation? What should I be learning in this challenge?

Third, *self-compassion*. Perfectionism and self-judgment are sure to derail us. “If a thing is worth doing, it’s worth doing badly,” G. K. Chesterton once said. That line always makes me laugh. But it carries an essential truth: Doing is better than not doing perfectly. Give yourself a break and keep plugging away.

Fourth, *a sense of agency*. Don’t lose sight of this. Entitlement, as Brown says, is about feeling like we deserve success. Agency is the exact opposite. It’s realizing we must work to achieve it. Agency sees an obstacle and says, “I can overcome this,” while entitlement complains about not being done yet. If we keep our agency, we can survive the times our dreams cease being fun, fast, or easy.

Fifth, *your why*. This one is so important I want to spend the rest of the chapter on it. In my experience, the thing that keeps me going is answering this question: “Why am I doing this in the first place?” I then try to remember the dream. I try to get connected to the original vision, because that keeps me going when the going gets tough. No one crosses the messy middle to reach their goals unless they really want what’s on the other side of discomfort. Think about parenting or getting fit or hitting a major professional goal. All of these challenges will test our perseverance. This means we have to connect with what researchers sometimes call our “autonomous motives”—reasons we find deeply, personally compelling. Why does it matter to you?





“Doing is better  
than not doing  
perfectly.”

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**Identify Your Key Motivations**

When goal pursuit is tough, it's easy to lose focus or discard the goal. If we don't stay connected to our why, as one study put it, "the infusion of goals with energy may be distressingly temporary."<sup>2</sup> In other words, chances are good we'll burn out and bail. But as another study found, "Autonomous goal motives will result in greater objectively assessed persistence toward an increasingly difficult goal. . . . If individuals strive with more autonomous motives, they will be better equipped to overcome challenges in goal pursuit."<sup>3</sup> Your why makes all the difference in the world.

Blake is the *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum whose girlfriend dumped him two days before a giant tree landed on his house. He coped the way a lot of us do: he ate and drank his way through the stress. Coupled with letting his exercise routine go, he put on forty-five pounds. He knew that had to change. As he followed the course, he assigned key motivations to each of his ten goals. "Once I started working my way through them, I was able to identify the importance that it had for me," he said. "Not for some exterior force or a result, but why it was important for me to achieve this. That's when I really started connecting to them and started believing that not only were they words on a piece of paper but this was something that, yes, I have a part in."

Blake is talking about the power of intrinsic motivations. These drivers come from our hopes, our values, our ambitions. External motivation comes from outside influences like society, our friends, our bosses, and so on. External motivations are rarely as long-lasting or effective as intrinsic motivation. "When goal pursuit is fueled by personal endorsement and valuing of the goal, commitment and persistence will be high," wrote the scholars of the second study quoted above. "In contrast, when goal pursuit is the outcome of pressures or external contingencies, commitment will always be 'on the line' and goal attainment will be comparatively less likely."<sup>4</sup> If you want to go the distance, you've got to find a reason that speaks powerfully and personally to you.

When I was running my first half marathon, I had to get in touch with my why. It wasn't about what somebody else wanted me to do in terms of my own health. It wasn't a fundraiser somebody wanted me to run to raise money for their organization. Instead, I identified a series of motivations individually important to me. For example, I wrote this down:

1. I'm tired of being overweight.
2. I want to get into the best shape of my life.
3. I want the stamina and the energy to be able to be the most productive self I can be.

I had to identify my why. I had to see what was at stake if I achieved it. And I had to see what was at stake if I didn't achieve it.

I consider Steve Jobs a powerful example of this. When he came back to Apple in the late nineties, the company was almost bankrupt. If Jobs hadn't stepped in to save the company, there would be no Apple today. No iPhone. No iPad. No iMac. No MacBook Pro. No AppleTV. These are tools I use every day of my life. But Jobs's why went deeper. Not only did he cofound the company, he also had a radical vision for the inherent value of simple, elegant machines. That vision drove a product-line overhaul and new marketing strategy that not only saved the company, it drove it to dominance. Jobs and his team got in touch with their why and changed the world.

So what are the whys attached to your goals?

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## Record and Prioritize Your Key Motivations

I write key motivations as a series of bullets and usually end up with somewhere between five and seven. I recommend listing each one until you run out. After that you'll want to prioritize them. But not all. I recommend identifying your top three. You may have plenty more, but I find it's most effective to boil your list of motivations down to just a few that really inspire you. Go through the list and rank them. Why is this important? You want to identify your most compelling motivations so you have several convincing reasons readily available to keep pressing and accomplish your goal.

For example, when Gail and I have a fight—yes, we do have fights—I ask, “So why should I stay in this marriage?” Instead of pushing that question down like holding a beach ball under water, I let it surface and embrace it. “What is at stake?” Notice: I'm not asking “Why should I quit?” because I will get answers to that question too. The mind is tricky that way. It will attempt to answer whatever question you ask it, so be careful with how you frame the question. Instead, I focus on the positive. I am looking for reasons to keep going.

Here's the list I keep for my marriage. When the going gets tough and the question arises “Why should I stay in this marriage?” I have a ready resource to reorient myself:

1. Because I want love to be the defining characteristic of my life. There is no better place to learn how to love than marriage. I really do love this woman with all my heart.
2. Because I want to be a leader, leading myself first and then my

own family. Whatever else this means, it means initiative and sacrifice. That's what leaders do.

3. Because Gail is my best friend, even though we occasionally get on one another's last nerve. She is the one person I can count on to be there when I need someone to listen to me.

I have a written list like this for every important area or goal in my life. If I get stuck and want to quit, I pull out the list and start reading through it. Immediately, it gives me perspective and energizes me. It makes it possible to silence the voices and get my head back into the race.

A few years ago I was writing my book *Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World*. I had a very clearly written goal: "Deliver a fifty-thousand-word manuscript to the publisher by November 1, 2011." I had a great plan. As I started the year, I began writing. By the middle of the summer I had a rough, very rough draft of the manuscript that was about fifty thousand words. But I had a lot of work yet to do. Then things got crazy busy toward fall. I was inundated with speaking requests, coaching inquiries, and consulting assignments. I had just launched my business, and I was reluctant to say no to anything. Well, naturally, I got buried alive. And I wasn't making any progress on the manuscript.

I could see I was going to miss the November deadline by a mile. Honestly, I got discouraged. I didn't see any way to get it done. And despite all the work I'd already invested, I wanted to give up. Then I remembered something my wife had said to me many times before: "People lose their way when they lose their why." That's when I remembered I had written out a bulleted list of my key motivations. I knew they would be important when the going got tough.

Here are the top three motivations I listed then:

1. I want to help tens of thousands of authors, artists, and would-be creatives who have been turned away because they don't have a platform. [This was one of my fundamental motivations for writing the book in the first place.]
2. I want to establish my authority as an expert on platform building and open the door to additional speaking engagements on this topic.
3. I want to prove that you can create a platform and use it to sell books.

When I reconnected with my key motivations—not just intellectually but emotionally—it reignited my passion. I recommitted to finishing the manuscript. I was a few weeks late, but I did it. And

*Platform* went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller. All because I reconnected with my motivations. I found my why. Looking back, it's hard to imagine what would have happened if I hadn't kept my list of key motivations for *Platform*. One thing I know for sure. My current business wouldn't exist.

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## Connect with Your Key Motivations

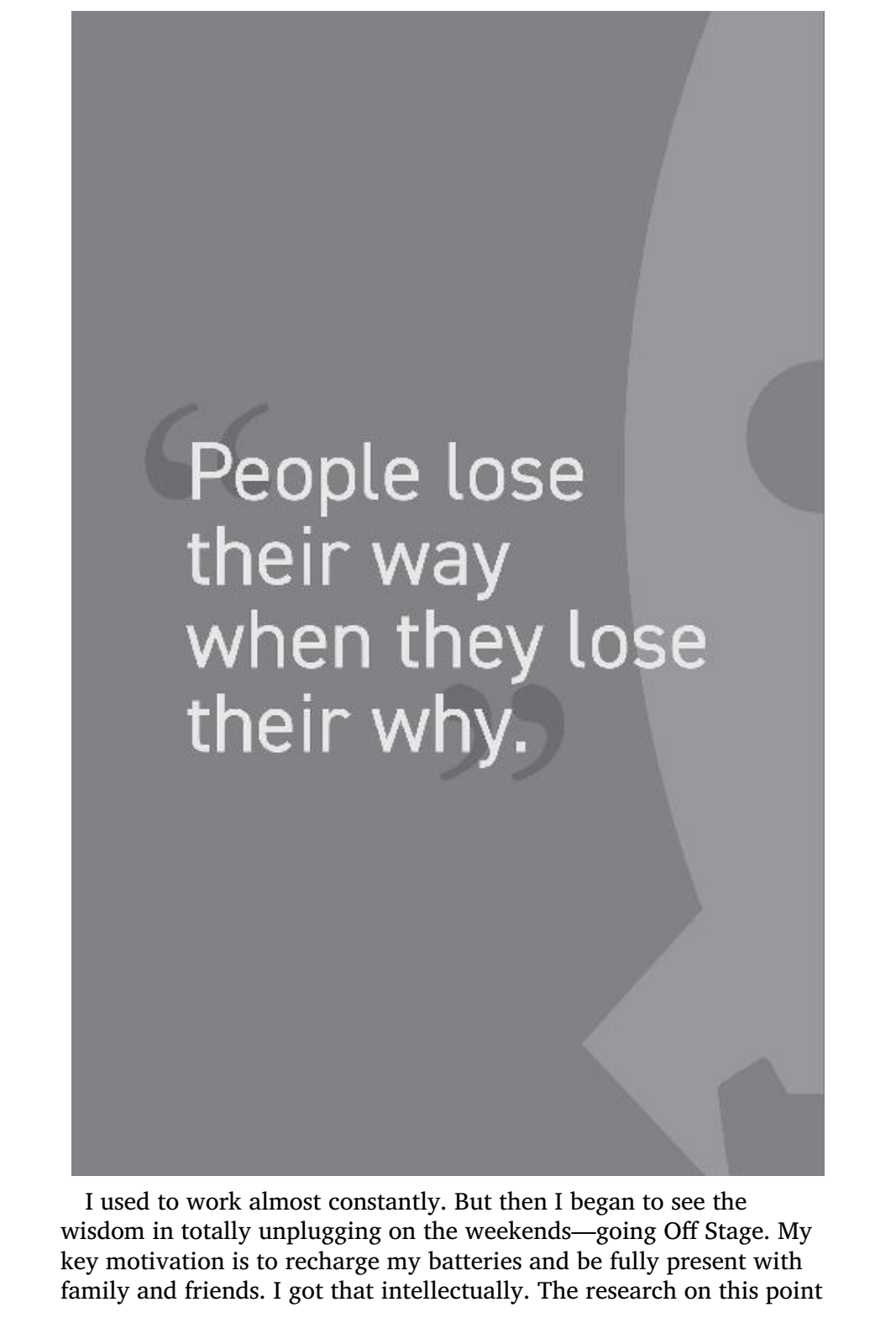
Now, when I say connect, I mean this in two ways. First of all, *intellectually*. It's important to have intellectual buy-in to the motivation. Maybe it's some research you've done, remarkable data, or an argument you find intellectually compelling.

Second, you need to buy in *emotionally*. It's not only important to understand it. It's important to feel what's at stake. Anticipate what it would feel like to achieve that goal. Or, conversely, what it would feel like if you missed that goal.

One of my key motivations for strength training is to increase my energy, stamina, and productivity. I connect intellectually because I know all the research points to those outcomes. But I connect emotionally because I remember what it feels like when I'm strength training on a regular basis. Even before I exercise, I can feel that increased stamina, energy, and productivity.

When researchers at New Mexico State University tried to figure out why people like to exercise, they came back to the power of this emotional connection. Nine out of ten in one group said they exercised because they expected to feel good afterward. Seven out of ten in another group said they did it because of the sense of accomplishment they feel.<sup>5</sup> Writing your motivations down is important, but getting that kind of emotional connection is even more critical.

Another example comes from how I structure my week. I talk about this in my *Free to Focus* productivity course. I think of my week like a stage. I divide the time between Front Stage, Back Stage, and Off Stage time. Front Stage time is when I'm working on the projects that are in my Desire Zone. These are the projects that drive the most revenue for my business and intersect with my greatest passion and proficiency. Back Stage time is dedicated to the more mundane tasks of managing the business and preparing for those Front Stage performances. But Off Stage time is reserved for rest and rejuvenation.



“People lose  
their way  
when they lose  
their why.”

I used to work almost constantly. But then I began to see the wisdom in totally unplugging on the weekends—going Off Stage. My key motivation is to recharge my batteries and be fully present with family and friends. I got that intellectually. The research on this point

is irrefutable. That was enough to get me started. It was enough for me to commit to Off Stage time. But it took a while to connect with it emotionally. I love my work, so completely disconnecting did not come naturally. Now I love the downtime and look forward to it. I'm not only intellectually committed; I'm emotionally invested as well. And that's enabled me to stay the course.

Everyone struggles staying the course. Ray, the *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alum I introduced earlier, sure did. Year after year, he made health and financial goals. Meanwhile, his health deteriorated along with his finances. Though he ran a successful business, he was spending more than he was bringing in and racked up \$400,000 in consumer debt. When he told me that, I almost fell out of my chair. But that was only the start. A few years ago Ray was diagnosed with Parkinson's, a degenerative disease that affects his central nervous system. It can be terribly debilitating.

## CONNECT WITH YOUR KEY MOTIVATIONS



INTELLECTUALLY



EMOTIONALLY

We can know the reason why a change is good, but we won't change unless the motivation lives in both our heads and our hearts.

Ray said, "I'm almost fifty years old and I've been telling myself one day I'm going to get out of debt. One day I'm going to take care of my family. One day I'm going to build a retirement fund. One day I'm going to get in shape. One day I'm going to travel and do all the things that I promised my wife from the day we got married. And I was suddenly faced with the reality that might not come."

But as terrible as those circumstances are, Ray found his why buried inside. "I finally had that wake-up call where I realized I either had to do this now or was never going to do it. And I also knew my family was watching. I wanted to be there for them. I want to be there for my son's wedding. I want to be there when he has my grandchildren."

Those reasons, along with the desire to leave his family debt-free with a thriving business, lit a fire under him that kept him going even when he ran out of steam. “When I felt the temptation to stop or to give up, or rationalize why I shouldn’t do this after all, those reasons keep me going.”

When the year was over, Ray had lost more than fifty pounds. His doctor was surprised by his health. Ray also achieved a first-time-ever goal of hitting a million dollars in top-line revenue for his business. And he paid off all \$400,000 in consumer debt.

Another *5 Days* alum, Sundi Jo, has a powerful story as well. In 2009 she entered a residential program to turn her life around. With the help of therapy and prayer, she was able to work through several traumatic experiences that had crippled her. “It was one of the hardest, most rewarding things I’ve ever done,” she recalled. Then in 2012, Sundi Jo felt God tell her to start a residential program for other girls in need. At first she said no. “I said no about 175,000 different times,” she jokes. “It was too big for me. It was too scary, and I didn’t want to do it.” But she felt God nudging. When tragedy struck a friend, she realized it was time. Every year Sundi Jo goes through the course, she adds to the vision of Esther’s House of Redemption. She started with a goal to get the articles of incorporation started, then the day program, then finally the full residential program. “There are some obstacles coming up,” she says, “but I remember my why.” I can’t tell you how excited I was when she told me she had met her goal and opened the doors of the residential program.

Bottom line: You’ve got to write down your motivations. And you have to connect with them, not just with your head, but with your heart.

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## What’s at Stake for You?

To get through the messy middle, when progress seems impossible, find your why. Look at your goals and ask yourself, “Why is this goal important to me personally? What’s at stake both positively and negatively?” Once you’ve answered those questions, I recommend you list and rank your top three so you can quickly find your most compelling motivation when the going gets tough. The sample goal templates at the back have a place specifically designed to capture your key motivations. To give you an additional edge, in the next chapter I’ll share several ways you can master your motivation—even when it feels like you don’t have much left.



# You Can Master Your Own Motivation

If you're not passionate enough from the start, you'll never stick it out.

STEVE JOBS

My parents had me start piano lessons when I was five. I really didn't enjoy playing very much until about the ninth grade. Suddenly I wasn't just a piano player. I was a budding rock-and-roll keyboardist. That made all the difference in terms of my motivation.

About this same time I took up guitar. I started with classical guitar and then, of course, began playing electric guitar. I started a band with some high school friends. I had a good feel for the instrument, but I had scales and chords to learn, songs to memorize, and a tone to mesh with other musicians. At first we achieved a sound reminiscent of brawling alley cats. But we got better. I loved Crosby, Stills, Nash, and (sometimes) Young, so I also kept playing acoustic guitar. Then I joined the stage band when I went to college and learned to play bass.

During all of this I experienced moments of real frustration. Sometimes I wanted to quit and find something easier. I'm glad I didn't. Not only did I develop my skills, but sticking with it taught me something essential about achievement. At first I held on to my hope of becoming a rock god. Then playing became meaningful all by itself. I still play today.

We've all seen talented, smart, and well-trained people bottom out and quit on their dreams. It takes something more to achieve our goals. Call it perseverance, persistence, or grit—it's the willingness to keep going even when the odds are bad and our enthusiasm has waned. Think of the developers of virtual reality technology, tablet computers, or ebooks. After initial spikes of interest, all of these innovations faded as failures. Yet today they are all going concerns—including virtual reality—because people kept working, tinkering, and improving them. The lines of preparation and opportunity finally merged, and that can happen for us too if we stay in the game.

Next to finding your why, mastering your motivation is key for

developing the necessary persistence to make it through the messy middle. I want to share four key ways to do so: finding the right reward, being realistic about the commitment, gamifying the process, and measuring your gains.

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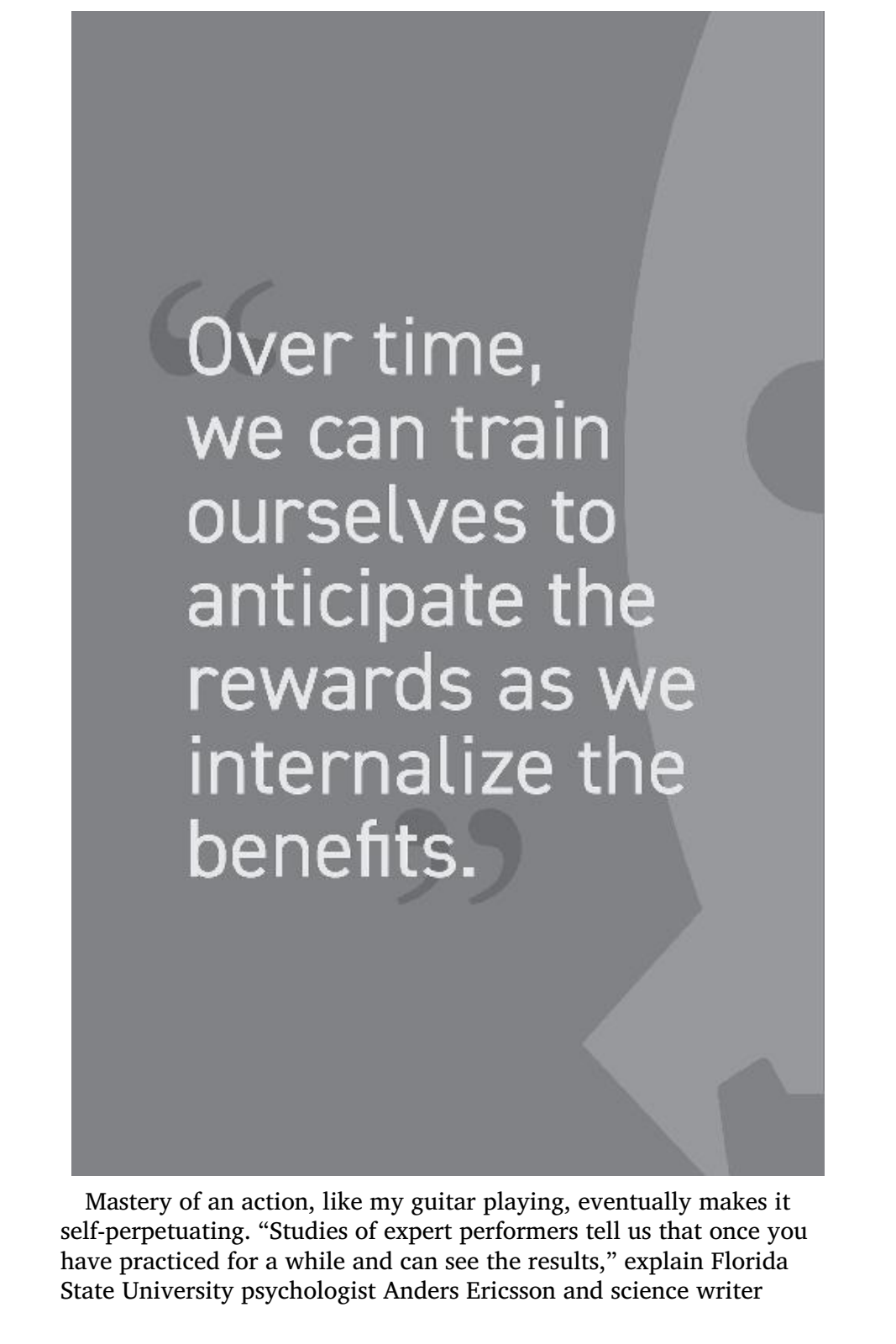
## Internalize the Reward

In the last chapter I talked about the superiority of intrinsic motivators. External motivators can work, but they're usually less effective in the long run, especially if we lose interest in the reward, get demotivated, and slack off before we're even aware. Worse, if those external rewards are someone else's idea—say, a spouse or a boss—we can become resentful of the reward if we're not careful.

Intrinsic rewards help us avoid that danger because we connect personally and emotionally with them. You might say they're self-justifying. They become an end in and of themselves, even part of our identity. I want to push that thought further by exploring how we can harness their self-perpetuating power.

Studies by Ayelet Fishbach and Kaitlin Woolley of the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business show that we tend to value an experience more when we're in the middle of doing it than when we're anticipating it on the front end or remembering it after the fact. Think about challenging activities like exercising, writing, or practicing a musical instrument. The joy comes from doing them. These findings are important, because action itself can be its own reward, and the gains begin when we begin.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, we can train ourselves to anticipate the rewards as we internalize the benefits. If we start with a suitable intrinsic reward, such as the way our new behavior makes us feel, we will naturally begin looking forward to it. This moves the reward from mere incentive to a potent source of energy and drive.<sup>2</sup> It's like the difference between *take your medicine* and *have another scoop of your favorite ice cream*. I experience this with running. I feel better once I've run. When I first started running that was enough to get me going. But having run for so long, I now look forward to that feeling. I anticipate it, and that gets me fired up before I lace up.



“Over time,  
we can train  
ourselves to  
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benefits.”

Mastery of an action, like my guitar playing, eventually makes it self-perpetuating. “Studies of expert performers tell us that once you have practiced for a while and can see the results,” explain Florida State University psychologist Anders Ericsson and science writer

Robert Pool, “the skill itself can become part of your motivation. You take pride in what you do, you get pleasure from your friends’ compliments, and your sense of identity changes.” The activity is fully internalized and has become its own reward. You’re now a guitarist, a runner, or whatever, and maintaining the activity begins to “feel more like an investment than an expense.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s worth it, but depending on the difficulty of the goal-related activity, it might take awhile.

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## Be Realistic about the Commitment

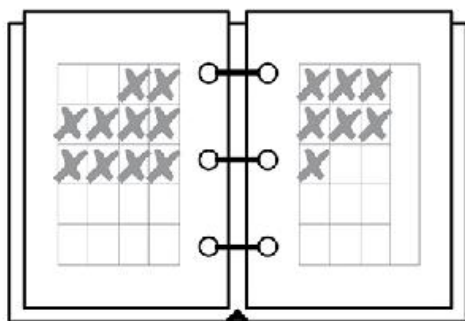
Running is automatic for me these days. I hardly have to think about doing it. But that wasn’t always the case. It used to require a lot of grit and determination. For as long as I can remember, I’ve heard it takes twenty-one days to form a new habit, thirty days at the most. If you can just marshal your willpower for three or four weeks, bingo! You’ve got it made. But that sure wasn’t true for my running. It took far more than twenty-one days. I’m sure anyone struggling to form a new habit can identify. We all know there’s got to be more to the story.

It turns out the twenty-one day “rule” is a myth with practically no scientific basis. If we’re trying to do something simple and easy, it might work. But complex or challenging habits take a lot longer. Researchers at University College London tracked people attempting to form different types of new habits. Instead of three or four weeks, they found it took an average of sixty-six days for new habits to become automatic—more than three times the popular duration. And some activities, they said, would be more like 250 days!<sup>4</sup>

It’s easy to lose your why when a goal runs into overtime. It might take an additional effort to get over the hump with your habit goals. Thankfully, there are a couple effective workarounds. For instance, we can leverage the motivation of an achievement goal to keep us going on a difficult habit goal by matching relevant achievements and habits. Running six days a week might not be your thing. But if you’re emotionally connected to an achievement goal of, say, losing twenty pounds by August 1, you can leverage that motivation to help you get up early and hit the pavement. If it helps, think of habits, not as ends unto themselves, but as serving larger achievements. The habit essentially serves as the next step in reaching your achievement goal. It’s easier to maintain the effort over time because your eye is on the bigger prize.

## Chains and Games

Another trick is tracking streaks. I've included a tool to do that in the sample goal templates at the back. But this could be as simple as a check mark on your calendar. Jerry Seinfeld famously used this system to build his writing habit. The idea was to write a joke every day and mark the calendar every day you write. "After a few days you'll have a chain," he explained. "Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain."<sup>5</sup> You can use your journal or set a recurring task in your task-management system to accomplish the same thing. However you track the streak, the chain system can work for just about any habit.



### CALENDAR CHAIN

Building a habit takes time, and it's probably longer than you assume. Maintaining a calendar chain can help you sustain the effort until the habit is firmly installed.

You can set the chain to any target: miles run per day, sales calls per week, date nights with your spouse per month. Writers often use daily word-count targets. The humorist Fran Lebowitz was once window shopping at Sotheby's. She was there to see furniture, but someone who knew her asked if she'd like to see an original Mark Twain manuscript. What writer wouldn't? As they looked over the pages, the man pointed out a curiosity. Twain had written little numbers in the margins. "We just don't know what those are," the man admitted. As a writer, Lebowitz did. "I happen not to be a Twain scholar, but I happen to be a scholar of little numbers written all over the place," she said. "He was counting the words."

"That's ridiculous!" the man said.

“I bet you anything,” Lebowitz said. “Count.” So they did—and she was right.

“Twain must’ve been paid by the word,” the man guessed, but Lebowitz didn’t think so.

“It may have nothing to do with being paid by the word,” she said. “Twain might have told himself he had to write this many words each day and he would wonder, Am I there yet? Like a little kid in the back of a car—are we there yet?”<sup>6</sup> It’s easy to think of works like *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* in their entirety. But they started out as big, daunting dreams that became reality one day of writing after another and keeping track along the way.

Another version of tracking is gamifying the activity. A couple years ago I wanted to build the habit of regular hydration throughout the day. I used an iPhone app called Plant Nanny. I was entrusted with a digital plant, and every time I drank a glass of water and logged it in the app, the plant responded as if it had been watered. But if I failed to drink and log my water on schedule, the plant would get sick and eventually die. It sounds silly, but I was intent on keeping my plant alive. The game made it fun to keep a ninety-day streak going. Now the habit is internalized and staying hydrated is its own reward. I have more energy. My thinking is better, my focus sharper. Gamifying the activity made it fun and helped me maintain the streak long enough to install the habit.

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## Measure the Gain

When we set big, challenging goals, it’s easy to see how far we have to go and lose enthusiasm. We can start criticizing ourselves and get dispirited. If your goal is to write a book, pay off your mortgage, build up your retirement, whatever, it can be daunting to look up and realize how far you still have to go. That’s The Gap™. Something I learned from Dan Sullivan has helped me rethink this problem. Dan talks about measuring the gain, not the gap.

So take a minute and look at the gain. See how far you’ve already come and let your progress inspire your perseverance. This is another reason setting milestones is helpful. Not only do they help break up the big goal into manageable chunks, they give us something to measure—forward or backward. By measuring the gains we’ll not only cultivate persistence, we’ll also get a sense of our momentum.

One way to sustain that momentum is to measure the gain in real time. How? In *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, authors Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling differentiate lead and lag measures.<sup>7</sup> Lag

measures look backward to determine whether you've met a goal. Think deadlines, finish lines, or targets. For instance, did you turn in your graduate thesis on schedule or not? Did you complete the 10K or not? Did you reach your sales goal or not? Lag measures are an excellent way to measure achievement goals because they're tied to endpoints. But they're one-offs—and they're usually a long way off. It's hard to gain a sense of momentum that way.

Lead measures work differently. Instead of looking backward, they look forward. They measure the activity that influences whether you will hit your target. For instance, if hitting your sales goal is your lag measure, then making a certain number of sales calls each week could be the lead measure. Why? Because those activities enable you to achieve your sales goal. By focusing on the right measurements, we can maintain and even accelerate our progress toward our goals.

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## **Incremental Wins**

Success is about incremental change, but we live in an instant-gratification culture where we just don't want to wait. When we take control of our motivation, however, we can stay in the game long enough to see how that incremental change adds up to major achievements. And we can do ourselves yet another favor when we pair up with our peers to achieve our goals. I'll cover that next.

## The Journey Is Better with Friends

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor.

ECCLESIASTES 4:9

After the surprise success of J. R. R. Tolkien's children's novel, *The Hobbit*, in the fall of 1937 his publisher asked him to write a sequel. The public, he wrote, will be "clamouring to hear more from you about Hobbits!" Tolkien had no plan for a follow-up at first. "I am a little perturbed," he responded. "I cannot think of anything more to say about *hobbits*." The issue might have ended there, but it didn't. Tolkien mentioned that he had written more about Middle Earth, the imaginary world in which *The Hobbit* transpires. He offered to let his publisher read the material, even though it was missing the star attraction. "I should rather like an opinion, other than that of Mr. C. S. Lewis and my children, whether it has any value in itself . . . apart from hobbits."

A cog was turning in Tolkien's mind. For nearly two decades he'd hustled at uninteresting, sideline writing projects to make financial ends meet. But now, despite having no real plans for a sequel, he was imagining how he might pull it off. "I must confess that your letter has aroused in me a faint hope," he continued. "I begin to wonder whether duty [the need for cash] and desire [his passion for the stories he loved] may not (perhaps) in future go more closely together."<sup>1</sup>

You can hear it through the tentative language: Here at last was his big chance to tell stories he loved and simultaneously improve his family's financial situation. Tolkien knew this was a life-changing opportunity. All he had to do was write another novel—preferably with more hobbits. Easy, right? It seemed so at first. By Christmas he finished the first chapter of the sequel. He was on his way! But then life happened.

Personal distractions, professional duties, and health crises seemed to pile up and prevent him from making any progress. Several times



he gave up work on the project. “I have no idea what to do with it,” he admitted. Reading through his letters, you can spot a familiar zigzag pattern. He went back and forth between feeling confident and close to finishing, and running out of inspiration and energy to complete the project. At one point he said his “labour of delight” had been “transformed into a nightmare.”<sup>2</sup>

I say it’s familiar because we’ve all experienced something similar when we’ve pursued significant goals. Motivation and confidence undulate like waves. So how did Tolkien overcome the distractions and discouragement to finish *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the top-selling books of the twentieth century? The answer starts back at the beginning with Tolkien’s friend, C. S. Lewis. At several critical moments, Lewis encouraged Tolkien to stick with the project when he had given up. “Only by his support and friendship did I ever struggle to the end of the labour,” he said in 1954 as the first reviews began coming in.<sup>3</sup> Over a decade later he still was quick to credit Lewis for his support:

The unpayable debt that I owe to him was . . . sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my “stuff” could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought *The L. of the R.* to a conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

Tolkien had a mammoth goal, and he never would have seen it through without the help of his friend. Like it or not, we’re in the same boat.

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## Success Is Your Social Circle

We have a very powerful myth in our culture, the myth of the self-made man or woman. But let’s be honest. There’s no such thing.<sup>5</sup> Success requires help—and usually lots of it. It’s impossible to discount the influence of our social circle. That’s why Solomon stressed friendships so much and so often. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another,” he says in one place.<sup>6</sup> He also warned about negative relationships: “Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul.”<sup>7</sup>

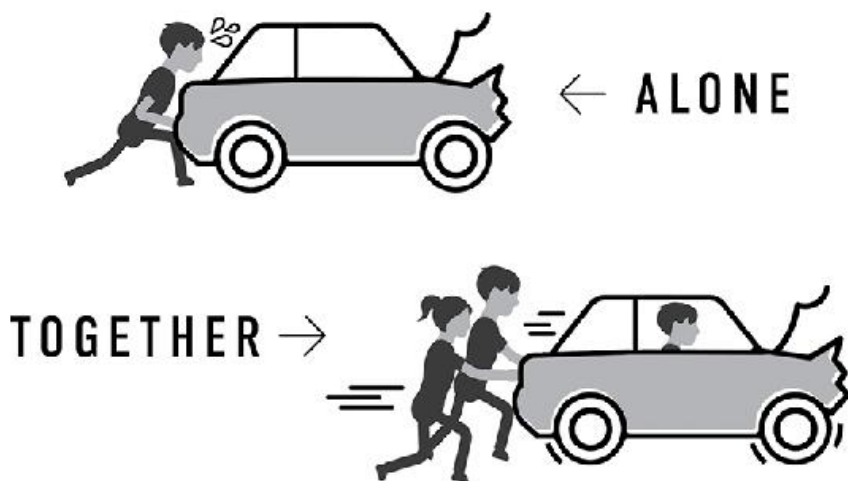


“Success  
requires help—  
and usually  
lots of it.”

Our peers matter. “Especially when it comes to self-improvement—like weight loss or overcoming an addiction—we need the energy of a community to stay with the program in a way that fuels us,” says psychologist Henry Cloud. “Research has shown that if you are in a

community that is getting healthy or overcoming something difficult, your chances of success go way up. . . . Positive energy is contagious.”<sup>8</sup>

By being intentional on the front end, we can engineer that positive, viral energy into our best year ever. Usually we drift into peer groups. They could be associates from work, our kids’ school, church, whatever. The important thing to notice is how often these relationships just happen. They’re not intentional. But if iron sharpens iron, we should be careful about the kind of edge others are giving us. Instead of random relationships, we can create communities that help everyone involved achieve their goals together—like Lewis and Tolkien.



Nobody has the strength to do their life alone. Let’s be honest, it’s a two-person job at minimum. We stand a better chance of completing our goals when we work with others.

These intentional relationships are invaluable in at least four areas:

- *Learning.* Getting connected with a good group can accelerate your learning, provide key insights, help you find important resources, and teach you best practices.
- *Encouragement.* Whether it’s business, family life, or our faith journey, our goals can seem impossibly tough to reach. A good peer group can give you the validation and support you need to keep going and rise above the tempests.
- *Accountability.* We need people who can speak into our lives and help us when we’re veering off track. The right peers are essential for this.

- **Competition.** Recall from Step 1 that abundance thinkers are not threatened by competition and even tend to value it. Why? Social pressure is a real and often beneficial force for achieving our goals. University of Pennsylvania researchers compared four groups of people who worked out over ten weeks. In one group, individuals exercised alone. In another, they exercised with social support. In a third, people exercised competitively as individuals. In a fourth, they exercised competitively as teams. The last two groups were able to compare scores with other participants, while the first two were not. The results? The two competitive groups performed *almost twice as well* as the noncompetitive groups, even when the noncompetitive group had social support.<sup>9</sup>

And of course it's not just about what you get. You can offer the same learning, encouragement, accountability, and competitive pressure to others in the group. That means you've got to share your goals selectively with the kind of people who can help you achieve them.

Note I said *selectively*.

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## Choose Your Circle Wisely

Honestly, I didn't always believe this. I used to share my goals with anyone who would listen. In fact, I even posted them on my blog for the world to see. Then I heard Derek Sivers, the founder of CD Baby, speak at TED. "The repeated psychology tests have proven that telling someone your goal makes it less likely to happen," he said.<sup>10</sup> Why? Because your brain experiences the same sense of satisfaction as if you had actually accomplished it. It works against you. But I knew that couldn't be the whole story, could it?

I went back to the work of Gail Matthews. According to her research, people who write down their goals and share them with supportive friends do better than those who keep them private. How are we supposed to reconcile these apparently contradictory views? Like this: We share our goals, but not with everyone. Instead, we share them selectively with supportive friends. People who understand the goal-setting process. People who are willing to hold us accountable. People who are willing to call us out when we're making excuses. People who can encourage and energize us when we hit the messy middle.

The classic example for this is Alcoholics Anonymous. Charles

Duhigg investigated the success of the organization for his book *The Power of Habit*. As I pointed out in Step 1, belief in the possibility of sobriety made the difference between success and failure. But that belief was made possible by the dynamic of the support group. “At some point, people in AA look around the room and think, *if it worked for that guy, I guess it can work for me*,” one researcher told Duhigg. “There’s something really powerful about groups and shared experiences.”<sup>11</sup> Duhigg followed this line further, pointing to several examples where being “embedded in social groups” led to personal change and transformation. One woman compared joining a group to cracking the lid on Pandora’s box—in a good way. After joining the group and upgrading her outlook, there was no going back. “I could not tolerate the status quo any longer,” she said. “I had changed in my core.” Duhigg summarized his findings: “Belief is easier when it occurs within a community.”<sup>12</sup>

One of my *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* alumni, Scott, represents the power of our peers. After successfully reaching his goals, he said, “It’s been great to be able to do this with some friends who have walked alongside me and encouraged me along the way.” And the benefit was more than one-way. “I’ve been able to help them as well,” he said. Scott and his friends put together a shared goal sheet on Google and regularly check in with each other. “My greatest piece of advice is bring others in,” he said. “That’s been the most effective thing for me—to have others check on me and then others that I can hold accountable as well. It is absolutely worth it.”

The right peers serve as a support structure for our liberating truths. They help us retain our belief and commitment when we hit the messy middle. The main issue is the composition of the community and the beliefs it holds in common. If you surround yourself with scarcity thinkers, you’ll struggle to stay motivated in pursuit of your goals. If, on the other hand, you surround yourself with abundance thinkers, you’ll gain access to encouragement, emotional and material support, solutions, insights, and more. Ideas don’t just come out of the blue. They’re usually the product of conversations. When we’re around the right people, we make better, more useful connections between thoughts and generate fresh and innovative approaches to our challenges. As economist Enrico Moretti says, “Being around smart people tends to make us smarter, more creative, and ultimately more productive. And the smarter the people, the stronger the effect.”<sup>13</sup>

I started by mentioning Tolkien and Lewis. Other creative pairs demonstrate a similar dynamic. The relationship of Paul McCartney and John Lennon was sometimes competitive. Other times it was collaborative. But either way, they could not have accomplished what they did without each other.<sup>14</sup>

# What Groups Work Best?

These peer groups can take different shapes and configurations depending on how intimate we desire them to be. Here are some examples of different groups that might work for you.

*Online communities.* I'm proud of the community my readers and podcast listeners have helped me build at MichaelHyatt.com. It's a source of information and encouragement to thousands of high-achieving entrepreneurs and leaders, including me. The same is true for the private Facebook communities we've created for *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* and my productivity course, *Free to Focus*, as well as Platform University. The breakthroughs and transformations we see every week in the lives of the participants are compelling. Whatever your chosen goals, there are groups like this that can help you reach the finish line.

*Running and exercise groups.* You can tap into an existing community by joining an exercise class or running club. When I ran my first half marathon, I trained by myself. But the second and third times around I wanted the benefit of training with a group. My daughter Megan organized a team to run for a local charity. For four months leading up to the race, about thirty of us met every Saturday morning to run. Most every community has something similar. And if there isn't one in your area, why not start it yourself?

*Masterminds.* These peer-to-peer coaching groups are a key way to learn best practices, get feedback on challenges, and hear how others have already crossed the hurdles you're facing. These groups work best for sharing among people who are highly accomplished in their fields who feel comfortable sharing with others. I've participated in several over the years and experience massive gains toward my personal and professional goals.

*Coaching or mentoring circles.* Everyone needs a guide, preferably many. Mentors share their experience and maturity to counsel, inspire, and challenge us, whether in person or virtually. I belong to one group like this right now, as a participant. And I've led several mentoring groups over the years, bringing young professionals together to grow through some of life's challenging and exciting moments. We recently launched groups like this for both *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever* and *Free to Focus*. We gather to troubleshoot problems, learn new tools and frameworks, and challenge each other to grow and improve.

*Reading or study groups.* There is so much to learn about life, faith, family, and business that sometimes the best way is to get a group of people around a table and study a book on the topic together. The book gives the group a track to run on, and the right chemistry among

the members can create conversations that go far beyond the book itself.

*Accountability groups.* There are very formal accountability groups like AA or the Samson Society,<sup>15</sup> but they can be more informal as well, like Scott and his friends. The idea here is that members are invited to speak into each other's lives, usually around a predefined set of struggles, to encourage and challenge when needed.

*Close friendships.* Nothing replaces good friendships. Lewis and Tolkien's relationship went on for years, and even when it was strained, it remained beneficial to both. Without Tolkien's knowledge, Lewis even recommended *The Lord of the Rings* to the Nobel Committee for its coveted prize in literature. It didn't win, but that's the kind of belief Lewis held in his friend's work. I've found the same thing among my own friends. It's easy to place work or family ahead of these sorts of relationships, but good friendships are like supports that hold up other areas of our life. And when a friend understands our dreams and goals, they can do more than most to support us when we struggle to stay motivated.

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## Don't Miss Out

Intentional relationships make us more productive, creative, and useful than we could ever be on our own. If you're like me, building these relationships can be a challenge. Professional and family demands can easily interfere with building and maintaining these sorts of groups, especially the more intimate and intensive ones. But if you're hoping to experience your best year ever, don't miss out! They can also benefit your professional and family lives in ways so big you may never be able to measure them.

## STEP 4

# ACTION PLAN



### 1. Connect with Your Why

Start by identifying your key motivations. Why do you want to reach your goal in the first place? Why is it important personally? Get a notebook or pad of paper and list all the key motivations. But don't just list them, prioritize them. You want the best reasons at the top of your list. Finally, connect with these motivations both intellectually and emotionally.

### 2. Master Your Motivation

There are four key ways to stay motivated as you reach for your goals:

1. Identify your reward and begin to anticipate it. Eventually, the task itself can become its own reward this way.
2. Recognize that installing a new habit will probably take longer than a few weeks. It might even take five or six months. Set your expectations accordingly.
3. Gamify the process with a habit app or calendar chain.
4. As Dan Sullivan taught me, measure the gains, not the gap. Recognize the value of incremental wins.



### 3. Build Your Team

It's almost always easier to reach a goal if you have friends on the journey. Intentional relationships provide four ingredients essential for success: learning, encouragement, accountability, and competition. There are at least seven kinds of intentional relationships that can help you grow and reach your goals:

- Online communities

- Running and exercise groups

- Masterminds

- Coaching and mentoring circles

- Reading and study groups

- Accountability groups

- Close friendships

If you can't find a group you need, don't wait. Start your own.



STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

STEP 4

STEP 5

## Make It Happen

**B**efore we go any further, I want to recap our journey so far. We've covered a lot of ground.

In Step 1 we said to create your best year ever, you must upgrade your beliefs and embrace liberating truths about what's possible in your life.

In Step 2 we discovered the power of backward thinking for completing the past, harnessing regret to reveal future opportunities, and leveraging the Gratitude Advantage to cultivate the abundance thinking necessary to prevail.

In Step 3 we saw how to design a compelling future using a mix of SMARTER achievement and habit goals and why your best year ever lies just outside your Comfort Zone.

Then in Step 4 we talked about tapping into the power of intrinsic motivation and traveling with friends to stay the course through the messy middle.

Now in Step 5 we're going to talk about making it happen. It's not enough to plan. It takes action to fully realize our goals.

## One Journey Is Many Steps

The great doesn't happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together.

VINCENT VAN GOGH, from a letter to his brother Theo

At the start of the Civil War, few military careers looked as bright as General George B. McClellan's. A string of early victories not only earned him the nickname "Napoleon of the American Republic," they also catapulted him to the attention of leaders in Washington. Lincoln soon promoted him to commander of the Army of the Potomac and, later, first general-in-chief of the Union Army.

The North was excited to have McClellan at the helm. "The troops . . . under McClellan will be invincible," said the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at the news of his promotion.<sup>1</sup> But the enthusiasm didn't last. The new commander leapt to training his men but hesitated when it came time to attack the enemy. McClellan was constantly organizing and preparing. According to him, the army was never quite ready. McClellan exercised "obsessive caution," as his biographer and historian Stephen Sears put it, even when he had the clear advantage over his enemies. All his planning and preparing meant too little action, too late to do any good.

McClellan's failure to stop General Robert E. Lee at Antietam was the direct fault of his reluctance. "Against an enemy he outnumbered better than two to one, George McClellan devoted himself to not losing rather than winning," said Sears. "Nor would he dare to renew the battle the next day."<sup>2</sup> McClellan dug in when he should have moved on. At one point, Lincoln famously wrote McClellan, "If you don't want to use the army, I should like to borrow it for a while."

Part of McClellan's problem was that he regularly overestimated the size of the enemy. The more daunting the enemy grew in his mind, the less confidence he showed in the field. Ultimately, he lost Lincoln's confidence, squandered his opportunity, prolonged the war, and cost the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides of the

conflict. McClellan demonstrates a key truth when it comes to experiencing our best year ever: Setting the goal is only half the job. The other half is taking definitive action.

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## The Art of the Start

I meet people all the time who get bogged down in planning and preparation. They'd like to launch a new product, find another job, write their first book—but they just can't seem to pull the trigger. Like McClellan, they feel unsure and unready. So they spend their time dreaming, researching, and planning. Don't get me wrong. Detailed action plans are terrific—if you're building a nuclear submarine. For most of the goals you and I will set, however, detailed planning easily becomes a fancy way to procrastinate. It's a lot easier to plan than take action.

At this stage of the game, the most important aspect of making it happen is practicing the art of the start. You don't have to see the end from the beginning. In fact, you *can't* if your goal is big enough. And the good news is that you don't need to. All you have to see is the next step. Any goal is manageable one action at a time. But, like McClellan, when we let the task grow and become daunting in our minds, it can leave us feeling indecisive, discouraged, and even paralyzed with panic.

What's the alternative?

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## Do the Easiest Task First

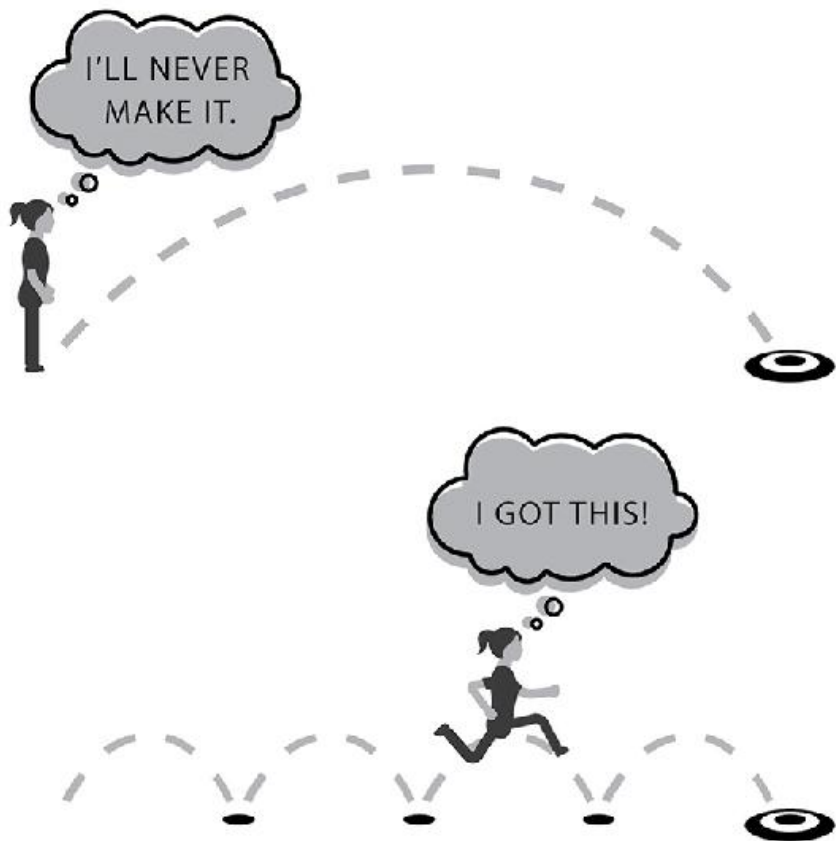
Years ago I heard a motivational speaker encourage his audience to “eat that frog.” The line has a long history.<sup>3</sup> And it makes sense in its own way: Stop procrastinating and just do the thing you fear. Once you do that, everything else is easy. While that may be helpful in overcoming procrastination, it's exactly backward for big goals and projects. Instead, you should tackle your easiest task first.

I've written several books now, and the way I do it is almost always the same. I start with the easiest task first. I write the title page, the dedication, and the table of contents. Then I think through the chapters, pick the easiest chapter, and tackle it first. A book feels daunting. But one chapter is doable, especially if it's the easiest one. When I launch a new product, create a new course, or undertake any major goal, I operate the same way.

While we should set goals in the Discomfort Zone, the way to tackle a goal is to start with a task in the Comfort Zone. There are at least three reasons to front-load your task list with easy items, starting with *motion*. The first step on any project is usually the toughest. But when you start with the easy steps, you lower the threshold for taking action. This is how you trick your brain into starting.

Second, *emotion*. Getting some quick wins boosts your mood. According to researchers Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats, “Finishing immediate, mundane tasks actually improves your ability to tackle tougher, important things. Your brain releases dopamine when you achieve goals. And since dopamine improves attention, memory, and motivation, even achieving a small goal can result in a positive feedback loop that makes you more motivated to work harder going forward.”<sup>4</sup> That’s exactly what happens for me. My excitement level goes up as I work, and it’s the same for my confidence.

Third, *momentum*. Getting started and feeling good about your progress means it’s easy to build momentum—just like I did with my manuscript. Gino and Staats say checking items off your list frees up mental and emotional energy to focus on other projects. You might also find the tough items get easier as you go. The opposite is also true. When you start with the hardest projects first, you can drain your mental and emotional energy. Now you’re lagging—and still looking at a handful of small jobs on your to-do list. Suddenly the easy looks hard. It’s a momentum killer. You risk getting discouraged and chucking the whole goal out the window. That’s like me walking into the gym, and my trainer says let’s go over to the bench press and press 150 pounds without warming up. That would be stupid. You need to warm up first. That’s what a next step in your Comfort Zone is all about.



Big goals are inherently daunting. If you're not careful, you can let it discourage you. The solution? Set goals in your Discomfort Zone but break them into a series of smaller steps in your Comfort Zone.

Take the example of fitness. Let's say you set a goal to run a half marathon this year. That goal is in your Discomfort Zone. You're not exactly sure how to accomplish it. Maybe you've already tried a physical challenge like that and failed. Don't let the size of the dream be its own demise. Instead of worrying how you're going to succeed, just commit to an easy next action—like calling a coach.



“Getting some  
quick wins  
boosts your  
mood.”

You're looking for one discrete task. You basically want to put the bar so low, you can fall over it. Then once that task is done, you can set the next. I don't care how big the goal is—it can be accomplished if you take it one step at a time. The sample goal templates in the back

have space to break down your big goals into next steps.

What if your next step feels uncertain? Don't sweat it. Just try something and don't worry if it's wrong. The goal may be risky, but the next action isn't. You're stepping out, but not far. If it doesn't work out, you just take another step. Stick with the running example. Let's say you call around and can't locate a coach. Oh, well. Now try posting on Facebook and seeing if any friends have a recommendation. Maybe there is a local running club you can join and train with. Whatever the situation, try something, and if you get stuck, try something else. Sometimes you have to try several different things before one works.

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## Seek Outside Help

Sometimes we just can't land on a next step because we're not aware of our options or we don't know what it takes to make the progress we want. The good news is, for almost every goal we want to accomplish, someone else knows how to get there—or at least has a better hunch than you. It may be a friend, an accountability partner, or a professional. You don't have to start from scratch.

A few years ago I was really struggling with strength training. I'd been running for years, but working with weights can be tough on your own. I'd done strength training in another season of life, but this time I couldn't make any progress. I just couldn't gin up enough motivation to get started. "I'm stuck," I told a friend. "I've had this on my goal list for the last couple of years and haven't made much progress." He said, "Dude, you need to bring in an outside resource. Call a trainer." I wanted to slap my forehead because it was so obvious, but I hadn't thought of it. I should have known better. After all, when I decided to learn photography, I found a course. When I wanted to learn to play the guitar, I hired a guitar teacher. When I decided to learn fly-fishing, I found a guide. There was no difference here. So after the conversation with my friend, I hired a fitness trainer and started working out with him three times a week. Suddenly I got momentum and began experiencing positive results.

Outside resources are almost always helpful in finding the right next step and accelerating your achievement. And outside help can appear in a variety of guises. It doesn't have to be a professional coach. It could be a book, an article, or a podcast. It could be a friend or somebody at church. Whatever your resources, I bet you can find the help you need to get you off the dime and into motion.

If you're not sure how to move the needle in your marriage, launch



your new business, write your book, restore your relationship with your teenage child, or whatever else you've decided to do, I've got good news. Someone out there has already been to the mountain. Even if your peak is different than theirs, they can help. There's a person who knows what to do, even if you don't. Your next action could be as easy as Googling to find out who.

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## **Commit to Act**

Whether you determine your next step yourself or resort to outside help, you next need to schedule it and commit to act. If it doesn't get on your calendar or task list, it's probably not going to happen. You're never going to find time in the leftover hours of the day to accomplish your goals. You have to make time for it. You have to make it a priority and keep it like an appointment, just like you would keep with anyone else.

There's a huge difference between saying "I'm going to try to make something happen" and "I'm going to make something happen." The first one is almost like saying, "I'm going to give it a go. If it works, great. But until I see the end result, I'm not going to fully commit."

The problem is it won't happen until you fully commit. In fact, researchers have found that when we create backup plans, we can reduce our chances of achieving our original goal. The mere existence of Plan B can undermine Plan A. How? We might divide our energies or settle for second best too soon.<sup>5</sup>

Scottish mountain climber W. H. Murray put it this way: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creativity, there is one elementary truth . . . that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way."<sup>6</sup>

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## **The Other Half of the Job**

General McClellan felt certain that his goal was important. "God has placed a great work in my hands," he said when he took charge of the Army of the Potomac. "My previous life seems to have been

unwittingly directed to this great end.”<sup>7</sup> But then he stalled out.

Another US general had the same sense of destiny, George S. Patton. He imagined great things for himself as a military commander, starting as a young man. He was born into a military family and excelled at horsemanship and other athletic endeavors, including fencing. Like McClellan, he rocketed to stardom early in his career. He started World War I as a captain and ended as a lieutenant colonel. A pioneer in tank warfare, he was famous for walking in front of his brigade or even riding on top of his tanks into battle to inspire his men. “George will take a unit through hell and high water,” his commander, General George C. Marshall, noted.<sup>8</sup>

In 1942 Marshall picked Patton to lead Operation Torch, the invasion of Axis-controlled North Africa. Patton faced all the limitations McClellan did. Right after taking the position, Patton found out his troops and supplies were insufficient. Instead of using that as an excuse for inaction, Patton took command and made his undersized army the most effective group of fighters he could manage. And he changed the course of history. “It seems that my whole life has been pointed to this moment,” Patton wrote just before landing in North Africa. “If I do my full duty, the rest will take care of itself.”<sup>9</sup>

And he did. His strategy: “We shall attack and attack until we are exhausted, and then we shall attack again,” he told his men.<sup>10</sup> That determination to act made all the difference. Patton achieved victories in North Africa and then in Sicily. After the Normandy invasion, Patton led his men six hundred miles across Europe, liberating Germany from Nazi control in 1945.

A big goal is only half the equation. If you expect to experience your best year ever, you must take action. And, as we’ll see in the next chapter, you can trigger that action with the right kind of planning.

## You Can Trigger Success

If passion drives you, let reason hold the reins.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

I had a habit goal I wanted to install: exercise for thirty minutes, Monday through Friday, at 6:00 a.m. There was only one problem. I couldn't seem to follow through. If you've ever failed at reaching a New Year's resolution, maybe you can identify. I usually started the week well. I would exercise on Monday and again on Tuesday. But by Wednesday, I was tempted to sleep in—and often would. Clearly something had to change if I wanted to achieve my goal. That's when I decided to focus on setting my gym clothes out the night before rather than on the goal itself. It sounds ridiculously simple, but that one practice enabled me almost effortlessly to develop the habit of regular exercise.



“Activation  
Triggers  
lock in our  
decisions in  
advance.”

More recently I discovered I was using a version of what goal achievement researchers call *implementation intentions*. I call them Activation Triggers™. These are simple statements or actions that streamline the process of reaching our goals. How? By anticipating

whatever contingencies or obstacles we might face, we can cue a desired response. Instead of relying on our decision making in the moment (when our mental and emotional resources might be at their lowest), Activation Triggers lock in our decisions in advance.

Because they address contingencies, we can think of them as simple if/then or when/then statements. They work, says social psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson, “because contingencies are built into our neurological wiring. . . . When people decide exactly when, where, and how they will fulfill their goals, they create a link in their brains between a certain situation or cue (‘If or when x happens’) and the behavior that should follow (‘then I will do y’). In this way, they establish powerful triggers for action.”<sup>1</sup>



It's hard to make progress when we're stuck in behavioral ruts. Activation triggers can get us out of the ruts and remind us of new and better behaviors that will help us reach our goals.

This sort of planning smooths out the friction we experience trying to maintain momentum and gives us a way to overcome obstacles. As researchers Thomas Webb and Paschal Sheeran point out, using an Activation Trigger makes us “perceptually ready” to act. “Evidence indicates that . . . responses that have been planned out in an *if-then* format are initiated more immediately, more efficiently, and with less need for conscious intent,” they write.<sup>2</sup> According to more than two hundred studies with thousands of total participants, *if-then* planners are about three times more likely to achieve their goals than those who skip this step.<sup>3</sup>

So how can you leverage that advantage for yourself? You can use Activation Triggers to reach your goals by following four phases.

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## Phase 1: Brainstorm the Best Triggers

So you've got a goal that meets the SMARTER standard. Now you want to identify the triggers that will work best for reaching the goal. Make sure your Activation Triggers are easier to achieve than your

actual goals. That's the whole point. You're leveraging the easy to do the hard.

After you've come up with a short list of possible triggers (two or three), select the one you think will set you up for success. Here are a few Activation Triggers I have either used in the past or am currently using:

- Program the lights in my office to turn off automatically at 6:00 p.m. so I follow through on my goal of quitting work by 6:00 p.m.
- Ask my assistant to automatically get dinner reservations for me each Friday night at 6:00 p.m. so I follow through on my goal of a weekly date night.
- Set up an automated macro that closes all my open programs and opens only the ones I will need for my quiet time so I follow through on my goal to begin the day with prayer, Bible reading, and reflection.
- Hire a fitness trainer to work with me on strength training so I follow through on my goal to do strength training Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.
- Throw out all processed food from my refrigerator and pantry so I follow through on my goal to eat only clean, whole, organic foods.
- Have my assistant book appointments to interview authors so I follow through on my goal to read one book per week.
- Set up an automatic deposit to my savings account so I follow through on my goal to save a certain amount of money.
- Take my laptop out of the house so I am not tempted to get back on my computer in the evening and follow through on my goal to have more Off Stage time.

Hopefully these prime the pump. Your triggers will almost certainly look very different from mine. The important thing is to identify them and build them into your life.

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## **Phase 2: Optimize Your Activation Triggers**

A major part of the Activation Trigger process is thinking when you're at your strongest, rather than relying on your willpower when you're not. With that in mind, you can optimize your triggers to further

promote success. Notice in my examples above how I have taken the trigger out of my control as much as possible using elimination, automation, and delegation. For example:

- I eliminated temptations that could derail me. I threw out all the processed food in my kitchen. I removed my laptop from the house.
- I automated my Activation Trigger using technology. I set up an automated macro to set myself up for my quiet time. I programmed the lights in my office. I set up an auto-deposit to my savings account.
- I delegated my Activation Trigger using my assistant. He sets up my dinner reservations and books interviews with authors.

By taking the trigger out of your control, you're no longer relying on yourself in the moment. You're identifying contingencies (such as desiring to work late or forgetting to secure a reservation) and taking care of them in advance. When the contingency arises, you've already handled it.

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## **Phase 3: Anticipate Obstacles and Determine Your Response**

Even with a set of Activation Triggers firmly in place, you can still get derailed unless you identify potential obstacles and detail how you will deal with them. For example, I have a habit goal of leaving the office promptly at 6:00 p.m. But my goal can easily be undermined by a phone call or someone dropping by at the last minute. The key is to decide in advance how I will handle each of these contingencies. Here's what I came up with:

- If I get a phone call after 5:45 p.m., then I'll let it go to voice mail.
- If team members ask to talk on the way out, then I'll tell them I'm happy to talk tomorrow.
- If I have to attend a meeting at 5:00 p.m., then I'll tell the organizer I must leave the meeting by 5:55 p.m.
- When an important email arrives, I will answer it before 5:30 and will not check email again after 5:45 p.m.

This kind of if/then planning replaces an in-the-moment decision with a predetermined cue. "When people have formed an

implementation intention, they can act [automatically], without having to deliberate on when and how they should act,” say goal theorists Peter M. Gollwitzer and Gabriele Oettingen.<sup>4</sup> The heavy lifting is already done.

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## Phase 4: Experiment until You Nail It

This is the key to success. You’re going to experience setbacks—especially if you’re normal. As I teach in *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever*, when you hit a wall, it’s time to pivot. Your goal might be sacred, but your strategy isn’t. Don’t give up on your goal, just change your approach.

That means modifying your Activation Triggers until they’re working right for you. Sometimes all it takes is a small tweak. For example, when I first set a habit goal to have more Off Stage time in the evening, I thought it would be sufficient to close my laptop but leave it in the den.

That worked for the first few days, but unfortunately I soon started cheating by opening the lid and checking social media. I solved the problem by removing my laptop from the house. Now it remains in my office.

Whatever your goal, the trick is to simply think through the contingencies and obstacles that will prevent you from achieving it. Once you’ve thought through the most likely hang-ups, you can pre-respond so you know what to do the second they occur. It might take a little imagination to think through the potential obstacles to your goals, but it’s worth it. Once you’ve used them a few times, they’ll become second nature.



## Visibility Is Essential

It is good to repeat and review what is good twice and thrice over.

PLATO, *Gorgias*

General “Jimmy” Doolittle is most remembered for his daring bombing raid over Tokyo just four months after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, but Doolittle’s most significant contribution to aviation happened many years earlier.

In 1922, he became the first pilot to fly cross country in less than twenty-four hours. He’d planned to fly by the light of the moon, but bad storms kept him in total darkness for several very dangerous hours. Luckily he had a turn and bank indicator installed on his plane. “Although I had been flying almost five years ‘by the seat of my pants’ and considered that I had achieved some skill at it, this particular flight made me a firm believer in proper instrumentation for bad-weather flying.” Flying with instruments was new and rare at the time, but without the indicator he might have been forced to “bail out” or just “luck it through,” as other pilots were forced to do.

There had to be a better way. “Progress was being made in the design of aircraft flight and navigation instruments and radio communication. If these sciences could be merged, I thought flying in weather could be mastered,” he said. The right mix of instruments could give him the direction he needed in the dark. It took several years, but he figured out a combination of radio and gyroscopes could let him fly safely regardless of visibility. And he proved it in 1929 by flying a plane with a totally blacked-out cockpit.<sup>1</sup>

I’d like to suggest several important parallels to achieving our goals in Doolittle’s story. The first is that we often try to reach our destination without enough support. Without proper instruments, when we face bad weather—which we invariably do—we’re forced to bail or just trust our luck that we’ll make it. We usually don’t, which is why there are all those sad statistics about New Year’s resolutions. As Doolittle found, when it comes to experiencing our best year ever, we

need the right mix of instruments.

You already have two: (1) a simple procedure for breaking down goals into next actions, and (2) a set of Activation Triggers. Now we need to add another: a regular goal review process. You can't just write goals and motivations. You have to review them and keep them top of mind.

Loughborough University Professor Cheryl J. Travers tracked students who not only wrote down their goals but journaled about their progress. She found they came to greater self-awareness about their goals and their progress, including discovery of how pursuing one goal impacted their pursuit of the others. They were able to better analyze what was holding them back and what it would take to keep moving forward.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing your goals and motivations will keep you ideating, self-checking, and analyzing. And that will up your resolve and stimulate creative problem solving.

I break goal review into three separate reviews: daily, weekly, and quarterly. Let's start with daily.

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## Daily Review

One of the main challenges we face with reaching our goals is losing track of them. We get distracted and sidetracked by life, and they slip out of focus. We can lose months of the year before we realize we're not making progress. A regular goal review process can fix that problem.

It starts with a simple list of your goals, a goal summary. You can do this in a physical notebook or planner, like my *Full Focus Planner*<sup>TM</sup>, or a digital solution like Evernote or Nozbe. You can even frame your goals and hang them on the wall. (I use a hybrid system of the *Full Focus Planner* and Nozbe, as well as hanging a summary on the wall. You need to find whatever works best for you.) To gain the full benefit of the review, you should scan this list each day. I know it sounds like a lot, but it takes only a minute. After all, you only have seven to ten goals, right? I do this as part of my morning routine.

Many people feel stuck or fail to make progress because they can't make the connection between their yearly goals and their daily tasks. All their hopes languish on a wrinkled sheet of paper in a drawer somewhere. I saw this in corporate strategic planning all the time. Massive strategy documents would be created with significant goal commitments. But there was no mechanism to translate those annual and quarterly commitments to daily actions. In the end, the big binder would wind up crammed on a shelf between other big binders, rarely

consulted and mostly forgotten.

The daily review is designed to make that connection between goals and tasks. As I scan the list, I look for relevant next actions. I ask myself the question: What is it that I could do today that would move me down the field toward the goal? I'm connecting my goal list to my task list. And I don't let that list get complicated or lengthy. As I teach in *Free to Focus*, I limit my tasks to what I call my Daily Big 3. So I never have more than three significant tasks to complete in any one day. But those three tasks are chosen specifically to help me achieve my goals.

A lot of people start out their day with ten or twenty tasks for the day. By close of business, they've only checked off half the items and they feel like a failure. They're creating a game they can't possibly win. Who's got time for that kind of demotivation? If you really want to make progress toward your most important goals, you need a fast and easy method to chunk down big goals into achievable daily tasks.

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## Weekly Review

Next is the weekly review. It goes a bit deeper and takes a bit longer, about twenty minutes. There's a triple focus of the weekly review. The first part is to stay intellectually and emotionally connected to your motivations. We identified those in Step 4. That wasn't an academic exercise. Ultimately the purpose of that list is to review it so we can keep our why in view. This is the secret to continuing to move forward when you want to quit.

I can think back to when I ran my first half marathon. It was really hard because I'd never run that far before. In my training, I never ran farther than nine miles. Bad idea, I know. I remember getting to mile 11 and really wanting to quit. Sometimes the messy middle waits till nearly the end. But that's what happened. So I dug deep and I remembered why I was running. I'd gone very public with my commitment to run. First and foremost, I didn't want to be embarrassed. Plus I had convinced a ton of my colleagues to run with me. What would it look like if the CEO whose smart idea this was to begin with didn't finish it? So I said, "I've got to finish. My leadership is at stake."

A weekly review keeps those key motivations present in our minds. When we're in the thick of it, it can be hard to recall. But when we're reviewing our rationale week in and week out, the reasons become so internalized, we know what's at stake.

The second part of the weekly review is a mini After-Action Review.

You'll remember the stages from Step 2, but instead of going through the process for an entire year, you just want to recap the past week. Review your progress. List your wins and your misses. Next, list the lessons you learned and what you would do differently or better. How will you adjust your behavior? Write that down too. Committing to the change on paper (or screen) will help you find clarity and build the necessary resolve.

The third and final part of the weekly review is to get a sense of what needs to be accomplished for the upcoming week. As we saw with the case of General McClellan, it's critical to break down big goals into actionable next steps. Now it's time to break down those next steps into the actions you must accomplish in the coming week. I call this my Weekly Big 3, and it's the best way I know to get traction and maintain momentum on those next steps. The Weekly Big 3 represents definitive outcomes I must accomplish to move closer to my goals. How does this relate to my Daily Big 3? I use my Weekly Big 3 to dictate my Daily Big 3. Taken together, the process works like this:



Here's an example so you can see it in action. Let's say your goal is to restore a classic Volkswagen Beetle for your daughter's sixteenth birthday, which is October 18. It's March 1. That's not a lot of time,

but it's doable. And the pressure is on because you want something super special to celebrate this milestone in her life.

The most important next actions are probably purchasing a car that fits your budget and having it shipped to your house where you can begin working on it. So how are you going to proceed? You might map out a complete project schedule, but you don't need to. The first step is buying the bug; that much is clear. And this is where the weekly review helps you connect your goals to your daily schedule.

To move toward your goal, during your weekly review you might identify the purchase as one of your Weekly Big 3 outcomes. Depending on the rest of your priorities that week, you could then schedule time to talk with your spouse about the budget on Monday, research time on eBay and Autotrader on Wednesday, and purchase on Thursday. Each one of those tasks would be part of your Daily Big 3.

All the way from the goal down to the individual daily tasks, the idea is to direct your actions so you're always gaining ground. The daily and weekly reviews make that possible. I designed my *Full Focus Planner* to offer an integrated goal-to-daily-task solution to make this process simple and straightforward. But regardless of the tools you use to implement it, the review process works like a road map to goal achievement if we're intentional.

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## Quarterly Review

As I mentioned in Step 3, I recommend setting goals by quarter so you space them out in the year and also prompt action immediately, instead of waiting till later in the year as a more distant deadline finally comes into view. Quarterly goal setting naturally leads to a deeper review every three months. You can treat it like a scaled-down version of the *Best Year Ever* process and walk the 5 Steps again. If you don't have time for that, the main purpose of the quarterly review is to analyze your goals and decide if they're still relevant to your life, and then make any adjustments if not. I like to take a full day for my quarterly review. But if time is tight I can usually do this in an hour—two at the most.

In the quarterly review process, at least five options are possible:

1. Rejoice
2. Recommit
3. Revise
4. Remove

## 5. Replace

First, you can *rejoice*. Let's say you've reached an important milestone in pursuit of one of your goals. Pause to recognize and celebrate it. I firmly believe in celebrating our wins. I recently took my whole company (plus spouses) on a Caribbean cruise to acknowledge a major victory. But it's important to pause and celebrate the small wins too. You don't have to wait to achieve the entire goal. In fact, the bigger our goals, the more important it becomes to celebrate small wins along the way.

The creation account in Genesis tells us God looked at everything he created and called it good. He didn't wait until the whole creation was done. He did it at each stage. That's a good model for us too.

Recognizing and rejoicing in our progress helps us stay emotionally engaged for the long haul. Celebrating triggers your brain's reward system, which, according to endurance athlete Christopher Bergland, is "a prime motivating force to help you keep pushing and achieve your goals. . . . Being self-congratulatory isn't about ego or hubris, it is about harnessing your reward circuitry and tapping your dopamine pipeline."<sup>3</sup> Winning helps keep us in the game. So we need to be serious about rejoicing when we score.

Second, you can *recommit* to the goal. This can be hard when you feel like giving up and walking off the field. But then you realize the game isn't over. Literally anything is possible. You never know what may happen. The only thing you can know for sure is that if you quit now, you will lose.

My daughter, Marissa, had a sales goal she was trying to reach but had given up before the end of the month. She thought there wasn't enough time to hit the target. I challenged her on it and asked what it would take to reach the goal. It was a bit like the story of Mura and Dorfman from Step 1. She had a limiting belief blocking her progress. But there was still time on the clock! She still had a chance to affect the outcome of the month. The moment she recognized that liberating truth, it gave her a new sense of ownership and possibility. She recommitted to the goal, marshaled her team, and beat it with only minutes to spare.

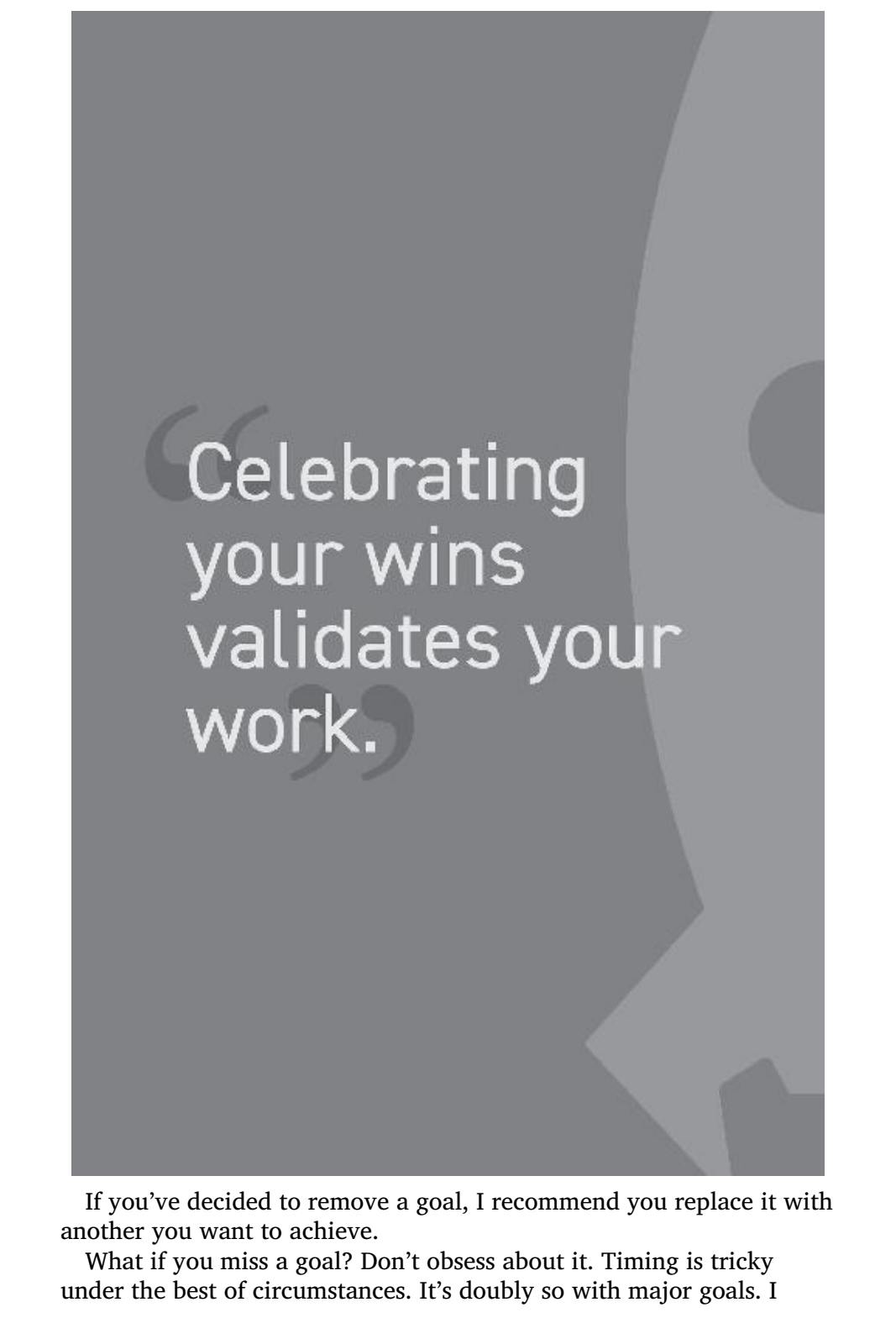
The key in this situation is to refocus on the original goal and reconnect to your why. In other words, list what is at stake. What will you gain? What will you lose? Once you have these in view, you can consider new strategies or find additional resources. But you have to decide, deep in your heart, *I'm going for it*.

A regular mistake people make at this stage is getting married to their strategy. Don't conflate goals and strategies. Your goal is the *what*, your strategy is the *how*. There's nothing sacred about your

strategy. You can change it at any time if it's not producing results. If we're married to our strategies and they fail us, our goals will suffer. But if we're committed to our goals, we can confidently pivot on our strategies as often as we need to hit our targets.

If you're no longer committed to the goal, your third option is to *revise* it. This is totally valid. After all, when you are planning, you have limited knowledge. Maybe you've realized that you set the goal in the Delusional Zone instead of the Discomfort Zone. Other facts or circumstances that you could not have known about may come into play—and they may be out of your control. You do have to be careful when revising a goal. You don't want to do it just so you can stay in the Comfort Zone and not stretch. But you also don't need to put yourself in a no-win situation just to prove a point. Personally, I would rather recommit if I possibly can achieve a goal and revise if I can't.

When I can't recommit, and I don't want to revise, the fourth option is *removal*. Grab an eraser. Hit delete. Don't let that shock you. It's a last resort but sometimes necessary. I'm all for achieving our goals. But the "Sabbath was made for man," not the other way around. This is your game. I never met the goal police, but I'm certain they don't show up when you strike a goal off your list. If a goal is no longer relevant, if it's no longer compelling, if you've tried to revise it and you can't, remove it. If you don't, the goal will just sit there and accuse you. There's no need to pay an emotional tax like that on your own list.

The background is a solid dark gray. On the right side, there is a large, light gray, semi-circular shape that resembles a gear or a stylized letter 'C'. Overlapping this and the dark gray background are several other light gray shapes, including a circle and a larger, more complex shape that looks like a stylized 'G' or a large parenthesis. The quote is centered in the upper half of the image.

“Celebrating  
your wins  
validates your  
work.”

If you've decided to remove a goal, I recommend you replace it with another you want to achieve.

What if you miss a goal? Don't obsess about it. Timing is tricky under the best of circumstances. It's doubly so with major goals. I



don't always reach mine by the deadline. If you're pursuing big goals, it's normal to miss the target sometimes. The important thing is to stay in the game.

Wrapping up, I recommend looking at the four quarterly review options as a decision tree:

- ▶ **REJOICE** if you've reached your goal/milestone. If you're not there yet,
  - ▶ Then **RECOMMIT** to achieve it. If you can't recommit,
    - ▶ Then **REVISE** the goal so you can achieve it. If you can't revise,
      - ▶ Then **REMOVE** the goal from your list. If you remove a goal,
        - ▶ Then **REPLACE** it with another you want to achieve.

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## Why Celebrate?

Before closing this chapter I want to come back to the subject of rejoicing. High achievers sometimes struggle with this one. I used to. After a win, I rarely stopped to celebrate before jumping into the next project. But remember the observation I quoted earlier from psychology professor Timothy A. Pychyl: "We experience the strongest positive emotional response when we make progress on our most difficult goals." That's only true if we stop to notice. When we achieve our goals or reach milestones along the way, we need to take the appropriate time to celebrate.

Celebrating your wins validates your work. And it's also a key component of living a full, meaningful life. After running a race in Greece called the Navarino Challenge, ultramarathoner Dean Karnazes was surprised at how the townspeople came out to celebrate the winners. They dropped their work, closed their shops, and started dancing. "These people were all willing to put aside what they were doing and join together," Karnazes said.

"If we always made decisions with our heads instead of our hearts, we'd probably live much more orderly lives," he reflected, "but they would be much less joyous. . . . How many people spend their entire lives striving for something with their nose to the grindstone, only to wake up one day and realize they haven't really lived at all?"<sup>4</sup>

When we skip the celebration, we cheapen our efforts. And we also shortchange our lives and the lives of those closest to us. That's why it's critical to dance across the mile markers. Bring your family into it.

Bring your friends into it. But take time to celebrate. Reinforce it. Let it sink into your nervous system and power you across the goal line. To give you a leg up, I've included a reward prompt in the sample goal templates at the back so you can identify upfront how you will celebrate when you accomplish your goals.

# ACTION PLAN



## 1. Break Down Big Goals into Manageable Next Steps

Don't fall for the old "eat that frog" trap. While your goal should begin in the Discomfort Zone, your next step should be in the Comfort Zone. Do the easiest task first. If you get stumped or stuck, seek outside help. You want to build momentum early with quick wins.

## 2. Utilize Activation Triggers

Brainstorm the best Activation Triggers for you. Remember to leverage what comes easy to do what's hard. Don't rely on your willpower in the moment. Instead, optimize your Activation Triggers with elimination, automation, and delegation.

You're going to face obstacles, so anticipate those and determine the best if/then response in advance. The idea is to plan your workarounds before an obstacle derails you. If you don't have it right to begin with, experiment until you nail it.

## 3. Schedule Regular Goal Reviews

For your daily review, scan your list of goals. You want to

keep your goals fresh in your mind and also think through a few specific tasks for the day that will bring you closer to achieving them. I call these my Daily Big 3.

For your weekly review, scan your goals with a special focus on your key motivations. Conduct a quick After-Action Review of the prior week. Review the next actions for each of your goals and determine what three outcomes you must reach in the coming week to achieve them. I call these my Weekly Big 3, and I use them to determine my Daily Big 3.

For the quarterly review, I recommend walking through the five *Best Year Ever* steps again. But the key is to (1) rejoice if you've completed your goal or passed a milestone, (2) recommit if you haven't, (3) revise the goal if you can't recommit to it, (4) remove the goal if you can't revise, and finally, (5) replace the goal with another you want to achieve.

# The LEAP Principle

Draw, Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and do not waste time.

MICHELANGELO, note penned as an old man to his apprentice

My wife, Gail, loves *The Jetsons*. The futuristic cartoon first made its appearance in the 1960s and stayed in syndication for decades. Nowadays Gail enjoys watching it with the grandkids.

The show featured flying cars, houses in the sky, robot domestic help, and leisurely (though humorously stressful) work. Some of those inventions have come true, and we've surpassed others. But critics point out that the utopian picture of the future is still a long way off. Entrepreneur Peter Thiel, an early investor in Facebook and Elon Musk's SpaceX, sees a big gap here.

"We wanted flying cars," he's famous for saying, "instead we got 140 characters."<sup>1</sup> I love Twitter, but I get his point. Based on the vision of previous decades, it feels like we should be further along than we are. So, why the lag?

Either we haven't acted on our priorities, or we have different priorities altogether. Thiel is a visionary. But he knows it takes more than vision to achieve our goals—especially big, audacious ones that will transform our lives for the better. "I disagree with the vision of the future where all you have to do is sit back, eat popcorn, and watch the movie of the future unfold," Thiel told economist Tyler Cowen in an interview. Dreaming of a better tomorrow isn't enough. "I think the future is open to us to decide what to do."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the future is in your hands. But only if you act today. I can think of no realization more important than this as we come to a close.

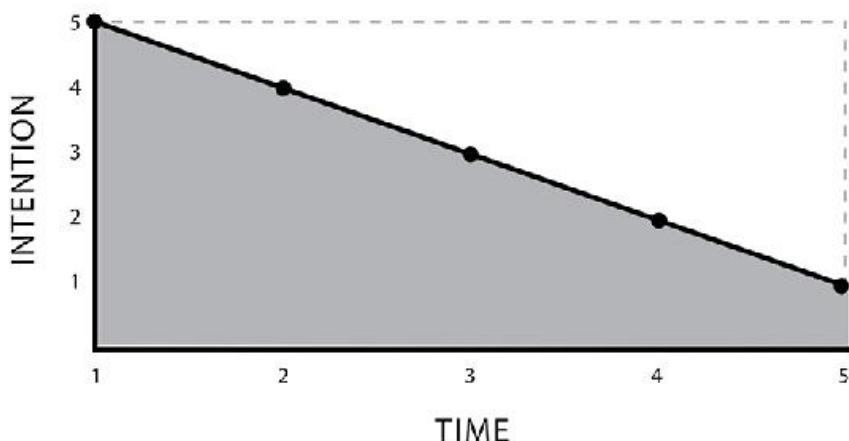
I see this all the time with people who set major goals for the year. If you followed the Action Plans for each step, you've got a list of your own by now. Let's say you want to get fit, write a book, or start a new business. Dreaming up big results can be emotionally satisfying and intellectually stimulating. But getting started requires action. And that can be tough. After all, how can you . . .

- make room in your schedule for the gym?
- find the hours it takes each week to sit and write?

- know if your new product has enough demand in the marketplace?

Those are good questions. And they're important to answer. But proceeding without all the answers is not the real risk here. Not even close. The real risk is this: When facing these sorts of challenges, instead of taking action we can coast on the good feeling of the dream without taking the necessary steps to see it realized. That's like sitting back, trying to watch the movie of the future. And you'll never get your hoverboard that way, or anything else for that matter.

## THE LAW OF DIMINISHING INTENT



Jim Rohn noted that our intention tends to diminish the longer we wait to take action.

Soon you'll be susceptible to the Law of Diminishing Intent. It states, the longer you wait to take action, the less likely you will be to take it. Jim Rohn originally noticed this phenomenon and coined the term. But you can beat the Law of Diminishing Intent and create your best year ever by leveraging what I call the LEAP Principle:

NEVER LEAVE THE SCENE OF CLARITY  
WITHOUT TAKING DECISIVE ACTION.

If you want to see a big change, you must be willing to take a big LEAP. It's as simple as four steps, one for each letter of the acronym:

- *Lean* into the change with expectancy. When you notice that a

change is desirable or necessary, that's your green light. Punch the gas pedal. That inkling is all you need to get going.

- *Engage* with the concept until you achieve clarity. Don't let the feeling pass. Work with it until you've got a sense of what to do. That nagging thought in the back of your mind might be the start of a whole new adventure—or the ladder you need to climb out of a deep rut.
- *Activate* and do something—anything. Sometimes we wait to move until we have all the information. That's a mistake. Clarity comes in degrees. And you only need enough light for the next step. Even if you get off on the wrong foot, the rest of the journey will become clearer as you go.
- *Pounce* and do it now. Once you've determined your next step, take it. Don't wait. Waiting feels safe, but waiting kills dreams.

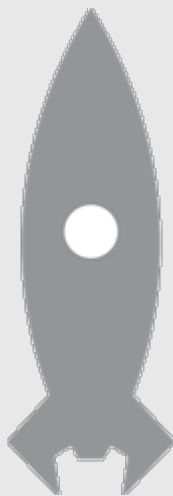
I've seen high achievers leverage the LEAP Principle time and again. A few years ago, I hosted a mastermind group of entrepreneurs and executives called the Inner Circle. At one of the first meetings, one of the members realized he needed to quit a professional organization he belonged to. The commitment was chipping away at his resources and not providing enough return.

It was a light-bulb moment and he jumped into action. He didn't schedule it for later that week. That would have left the issue unresolved, and the delay would have allowed his intent to diminish. Why? As he built up the complications of quitting in his mind, he would have found reasons to stay on board. Instead, he left the room at the very first break, made a phone call, and resigned. He took a LEAP.

Now it's your turn. Your best year ever isn't a movie you can sit back and watch. It's a vision that needs to be built, starting now, or it won't come true. It's no accident you were drawn to this book and that you've stayed with it till the end. This is your year, this is your moment.

Don't defer your dreams. Don't delay your goals. Don't procrastinate on the one thing you need to do today to make meaningful progress in your personal or professional life. Once you've determined your next step, take it. Don't wait. Take a LEAP.

# Sample Goal Templates



Here you'll find sample goals using the templates I employ in the Full Focus Planner.™ These are all hypothetical goals that you can use to guide your goal-setting process. I've included a mix of achievement and habit goals, one for each of the ten life domains. Your particular mix will look different; this is just to give you a sense of what's possible with a complete set of goals.

These templates demonstrate how the different elements of the Best Year Ever system fit together, including SMARTER goals (chap. 7), key motivations (chap. 10), and next steps (chap. 13). Using templates like these makes the goal review process (chap. 15) quick and easy.





## HABIT GOAL

Write your habit goal.



Q1



Q2



Q3



Q4

Read four passages from *The One Year Bible* every morning at 5:00 a.m., starting January 1 for 365 days.

| 1/1        | Daily           | 5:00 a.m.    | 365 days      |
|------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| START DATE | HABIT FREQUENCY | TIME TRIGGER | STREAK TARGET |

Domain



SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL

## ☒ STREAK TRACKER

Check off your progress.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
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| 41  | 42  | 43  | 44  | 45  | 46  | 47  | 48  | 49  | 50  | 51  | 52  | 53  | 54  | 55  | 56  | 57  | 58  | 59  | 60  |
| 61  | 62  | 63  | 64  | 65  | 66  | 67  | 68  | 69  | 70  | 71  | 72  | 73  | 74  | 75  | 76  | 77  | 78  | 79  | 80  |
| 81  | 82  | 83  | 84  | 85  | 86  | 87  | 88  | 89  | 90  | 91  | 92  | 93  | 94  | 95  | 96  | 97  | 98  | 99  | 100 |
| 101 | 102 | 103 | 104 | 105 | 106 | 107 | 108 | 109 | 110 | 111 | 112 | 113 | 114 | 115 | 116 | 117 | 118 | 119 | 120 |

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

To grow closer to God.

2

I want a more prayerful and reflective way to start the day.

3

I've never read through the Bible in one year; this plan will get me there.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Buy a copy of *The One Year Bible*.

2

Set my morning alarm 20 minutes earlier so I have time before the morning rush.

3

Let Jarrod know my plan so he's on board and helps me protect my time.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

I'll buy myself a new Cambridge Pitt-Minor NKJV Bible in goatskin.



## ACHIEVEMENT GOAL

Write your achievement goal.



Q1



Q2



Q3



Q4

Read 50 business books by December 31.

☒ S ☒ M ☒ A ☒ R ☒ T ☒ E ☒ R

MEASURE (CHANGE X BY Y)

12/31

DEADLINE

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☒ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MORAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

- 1 want to keep learning till the day I die and engage with new and beneficial ideas.
- 2 Because readers are leaders.
- 3 The fact that others don't read as much gives me an edge.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

- 1 Ask my boss and mentors what books they recommend.
- 2 Select at least 20 to start and load up my Amazon wishlist.
- 3 Buy high-end notebook to capture my thoughts on my reading.
- 4 Download the Audible app so I can listen to some of my list during my commute.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

Attend the first TEDx event in Atlanta next year.



## HABIT GOAL

Write your habit goal.



Q1



Q2

☐ Q3

☐ Q4

Develop a twice-daily meditation habit, starting January 15 for 60 days.

1/5

START DATE

Twice-Daily

HABIT FREQUENCY

5:00 a.m.

TIME TRIGGER

60 days

STREAK TARGET

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL



EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL



## STREAK TRACKER

Check off your progress.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
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| 101 | 102 | 103 | 104 | 105 | 106 | 107 | 108 | 109 | 110 | 111 | 112 | 113 | 114 | 115 | 116 | 117 | 118 | 119 | 120 |

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

I want to quiet my mind from all the noise.

2

I want to experience the health benefits of meditation.

3

I want to learn to be more present and focused.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Download Insight Timer from the App Store.

2

Set two daily reminders in my Reminders app.

3

Read *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

4

Find some friends who will also commit to meditation and set up group text to keep us encouraged and accountable.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

Go with Elaine on a weekend retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardonia, Kentucky.



## ACHIEVEMENT GOAL

Write your achievement goal.

☐ Q1

☒ Q2

☐ Q3

☐ Q4

Run the St. Jude Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon in Nashville at the end of April.

☒ S ☒ M ☒ A ☒ R ☒ T ☒ E ☒ R

MEASURE (CHANGE X BY Y)

4/30

DEADLINE

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☒ PHYSICAL

☐ MATERIAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1 I ran a 10K last fall, and it's time to bring up my game.

2 To feel the accomplishment of tackling something major.

3 I want to connect with other runners.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1 Download the *Runner's World* "First-Timers Half Marathon Plan."

2 Google a local runner's group to train with, especially for the long weekend runs.

3 Go to Fleet Feet and have them check my stride and shoes.

4 Buy a copy of Dean Karnazes' *Ultramarathon Man* and Christopher McDougal's *Born to Run* to get inspired.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

Buy tickets for Memphis Grizzlies playoff game—fingers crossed they make it this year!



## HABIT GOAL

Write your habit goal.



Begin regular date night with Ken every Thursday at 6 p.m., starting January 1 for the rest of the year.

|            |                 |              |               |
|------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1/1        | Weekly          | Thurs 6 p.m. | 52 weeks      |
| START DATE | HABIT FREQUENCY | TIME TRIGGER | STREAK TARGET |

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☒ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL



## STREAK TRACKER

Check off your progress.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
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| 101 | 102 | 103 | 104 | 105 | 106 | 107 | 108 | 109 | 110 | 111 | 112 | 113 | 114 | 115 | 116 | 117 | 118 | 119 | 120 |

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

To create regular space for fun and connection with Ken.

2

To deepen our relationship outside our kids.

3

I want to intentionally work toward becoming Ken's best friend.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Brainstorm rotating list of our favorite restaurants.

2

Ask friends about some new spots we haven't tried.

3

Make a new line item in the budget so we can plan ahead.

4

Check babysitters' availability and start scheduling.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

Go on a quarterly weekend getaway.



## ACHIEVEMENT GOAL

Write your achievement goal.

☐ Q1

☒ Q2

☐ Q3

☐ Q4

Take a two-week family vacation in Suttons Bay, Michigan, by June 30.

☒ S ☒ M ☒ A ☒ R ☒ T ☒ E ☒ R

MEASURE (CHANGE X BY Y)

6/30

DEADLINE

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☒ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

want to connect with the kids with some intentional time totally unplugged from work.

2

To keep the tradition alive. We've been doing this trip ever since Janet was 3.

3

To teach Tim how to paddle board.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Coordinate the time off with Julie and my boss.

2

Research and choose lakeside rental.

3

Buy new paddle board for Tim.

4

Check all the gear from last year and replace anything necessary.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

The vacation is the reward!



## HABIT GOAL

Write your habit goal.



Q1



Q2



Q3



Q4

Participate in Sally's Tuesday Night Wine and Supper Club, including hosting, for 26 weeks beginning March 1.

March 1

START DATE

Every Tuesday

HABIT FREQUENCY

TIME TRIGGER

13 weeks

STREAK TARGET

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☒ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL



## STREAK TRACKER

Check off your progress.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
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| 101 | 102 | 103 | 104 | 105 | 106 | 107 | 108 | 109 | 110 | 111 | 112 | 113 | 114 | 115 | 116 | 117 | 118 | 119 | 120 |

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

I'm tired of lacking friends, and I want to get integrated in a new community.

2

I love cooking and entertaining so this will give me chance to get that going again.

3

Savor new tastes and creations from the other participants.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Send Sally a Facebook message and let her know I'm in.

2

Join Sally's private Facebook group and introduce myself.

3

Go through my favorite cookbooks and brainstorm 15 scrumptious meals.

4

Get my knives sharpened :)

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

I'll buy myself a new KitchenAid mixer.



## HABIT GOAL

Write your habit goal.



Q1

☐ Q2

☐ Q3

☐ Q4

Make five sales calls to qualified prospects, M-F, at 9:30 a.m., starting January 1 for 13 weeks.

January 1

START DATE

Daily, M-F

HABIT FREQUENCY

9:30 a.m.

TIME TRIGGER

13 weeks

STREAK TARGET

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☒ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL



## STREAK TRACKER

Check off your progress.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
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| 101 | 102 | 103 | 104 | 105 | 106 | 107 | 108 | 109 | 110 | 111 | 112 | 113 | 114 | 115 | 116 | 117 | 118 | 119 | 120 |

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

So I can boost my income this quarter by 35 percent, maybe more.

2

To win the top salesperson award.

3

To help our team hit budget.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Identify the next three week's worth of calls.

2

Rearrange my schedule to block the necessary time.

3

Let my manager know what's up so she can keep me out of unnecessary pop-up meetings.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

A celebratory dinner with Mark at Bern's Steak House





## ACHIEVEMENT GOAL

Write your achievement goal.

☐ Q1

☒ Q2

☐ Q3

☐ Q4

Build a new outdoor deck in the backyard by June 30.

☒ S ☒ M ☒ A ☒ R ☒ T ☒ E ☒ R

MEASURE (CHANGE X BY Y)

6/30

DEADLINE

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☒ AVOCATIONAL

☐ FINANCIAL

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

Build a place to entertain family and friends.

2

Enjoy our beautiful backyard.

3

Increase the resale value of our home.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Download and customize plans for the deck.

2

Budget the cost of lumber and hardware.

3

Buy new Skilaw blades.

4

Have Beth pick a stain color she likes.

5

See if Beth's brother is free for extra help.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

Throw a Fourth of July party for family and friends!



## ACHIEVEMENT GOAL

Write your achievement goal.

☐ Q1

☐ Q2

☒ Q3

☐ Q4

Increase savings from \$6,000 to \$30,000 for a down payment on my new house by September 30.

☒ S ☒ M ☒ A ☒ R ☒ T ☒ F ☒ R

From \$6K to \$30K

9/30

MEASURE (CHANGE X BY Y)

DEADLINE

Domain

☐ SPIRITUAL

☐ INTELLECTUAL

☐ EMOTIONAL

☐ PHYSICAL

☐ MARITAL

☐ PARENTAL

☐ SOCIAL

☐ VOCATIONAL

☐ AVOCATIONAL

☒ FINANCIAL

## KEY MOTIVATIONS

Write your key motivations then rank them.

1

Equity: I'm tired of watching my income vanish in rent checks.

2

Impress my friends (and my future wife)

3

Experience a sense of accomplishment and independence.

## NEXT STEPS

List the first few steps you need to take to reach your goals.

1

Determine the amount to set aside each paycheck.

2

Review current budget to see what adjustments need to be made to my spending habits.

3

Set up auto-transfer from checking to savings so I don't forget or spend the money.

4

Post my key motivations on my bathroom mirror.

## REWARD

How will you celebrate?

I'll take a dude's backpacking trip with Rose and Jim on the Maroon Snowmass Capitol Creek Loop in Colorado.

# Notes

## Your Best Is Yet to Come

<sup>1</sup>. Brent Yarina, “A Race to Remember,” BTN, June 3, 2015, <http://btn.com/2015/06/03/a-race-to-remember-i-had-no-idea-i-fell-like-that-in-inspirational-2008-run>. Several videos of the race can be found online.

<sup>2</sup>. Allyssa Birth, “Americans Look to Get Their Bodies and Wallets in Shape with New Year’s Resolutions,” Harris Poll, January 26, 2017, <http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/In-Shape-New-Years-Resolutions.html>. See also: “New Years Resolution Statistics,” Statistic Brain Research Institute, January 1, 2017, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics>.

<sup>3</sup>. Laura House, “Got Ready for the Gym, Packed My Gear, Went for a Burger Instead,” *Daily Mail*, January 7, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3388106/New-Year-s-resolutions-broken-just-one-week-2015.html>.

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# Thanks

Let me tell you how this happened: Megan Hyatt Miller is my oldest daughter and the chief operating officer of Michael Hyatt & Company. In the fall of 2013 she said, “Dad, you have a unique approach to goal setting. I think we should interview you about that for Platform University® [my membership website]. We could use it as a master class in January.” I thought it was a good idea, so I agreed.

A few days later, Megan ran the idea by Stu McLaren, my partner in Platform University®. He loved the idea but suggested we turn it into a stand-alone, online course. We all got excited about it, and a few weeks later, we were in Toronto shooting it. Thus was born *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever™*.

Since that time, more than thirty thousand students from over one hundred countries have taken the course. Out of its success we created a live event that we host in January in Nashville. I also host a series of face-to-face, quarterly workshops for our most dedicated students. And now, this book.

None of this would have happened if it had not been for the vision, creativity, encouragement, and hard work of Megan and Stu. Thank you both.

My wife, Gail, is a constant source of encouragement. She is never afraid to speak her mind and express her opinion. But she always does it in a way that is loving and kind, something that has become her trademark in dealing with everyone who knows her.

Joel Miller is our chief content officer at Michael Hyatt & Company. He helped me stitch together this manuscript using the raw materials of my course, assorted blog posts, podcasts, and webinars, and my interactions with students both online and off. He worked tirelessly to finish this project in the midst of an unusually busy season in our business. He has truly become my creative partner and collaborator. I am grateful for his ability to analyze, synthesize, and organize my content into final form. I can’t imagine embarking on any creative endeavor without him at my side.

My literary agent, Bryan Norman of Alive Communications, has become an invaluable part of our team. He has been involved in every phase of this project from ideation to publication. He is my trusted advisor for everything related to my publishing pursuits. Not only is he crazy-smart, he is exceedingly responsive and near flawless in his

execution. His quick wit and light heart are an added bonus.

I am grateful to my editor, Chad Allen, for his vision, creative input, and patience in working with us on this project. He has been a literary midwife in helping me give birth to it. He is everything I could want in an editor.

I would also like to thank all my friends at Baker Books, including Dwight Baker, Mark Rice, Patti Brinks, Barb Barnes, and Julie Davis. Their approach to publishing is uniquely author friendly. This is our second project together, and we have more to come. I am deeply grateful for our publishing partnership.

My video producer, Dean Rainey, of Rainey Media, also had his fingerprints on this project. He helped shape the initial content of the course and has partnered with us through every iteration of it. His coaching and belief in me have been invaluable.

I especially want to thank the alumni of my *5 Days* course, including those who have shared their stories in this book:

- Natalee Champlin ([NataleeChamplin.com](http://NataleeChamplin.com))
- Ray Edwards ([RayEdwards.com](http://RayEdwards.com))
- James Reid ([JamesReid.com](http://JamesReid.com))
- H. Blake Edwards ([HBlakeEdwards.com](http://HBlakeEdwards.com))
- Sundi Jo Graham ([SundiJo.com](http://SundiJo.com))
- Scott Kedersha ([ScottKedersha.com](http://ScottKedersha.com))

You have become more than my students; you are my teachers.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention my amazing team at Michael Hyatt & Company, both employees and key contractors: Blair Arcaini, Suzanne and Justin Barbour, Jennifer Bogard, Matt and Lauren Brady, Andrew Buckman, Mike Burns, Chad Cannon, Kyle Chowning, Aleshia Curry, James Kelly, Alison Kennedy, Madeline and Shawn Lemon, Emily Lineberger, Jeremy Lott, Kristin McCall, Jeff McCord, Anna McKenzie, John Meese, Rachel Mullins, Suzanne Norman, Charae and Matt Price, Dean Rainey, Mandi Riviuccio, Danielle Rodgers, Christina Sheer, Brandon Triola, Kyle Wyley, and Dave Yonkowiak. You inspire me every day and enable me to do what I do best.

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# About the Author

**M**ichael Hyatt is the founder and CEO of Michael Hyatt & Company, a leadership-development company dedicated to helping high achievers win at work and succeed at life. As the former chairman and CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers, he is also the author of the *USA Today* bestseller *Living Forward* (coauthored with Daniel Harkavy) and the *New York Times* bestseller *Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World*.

His blog, MichaelHyatt.com, is ranked by Google in the top one-half percent of all blogs with more than one million page views a month, and he has been featured in such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, and *Entrepreneur*.

Michael is the creator of several online courses, including *5 Days to Your Best Year Ever™* and *Free to Focus™*, and the online community, Platform University®.

While Michael loves his work, it is not the most important thing in his life. That position belongs to his family. He has been married to his wife, Gail, for thirty-nine years. They have five daughters, three sons-in-law, and eight grandchildren and live just outside of Nashville, Tennessee.

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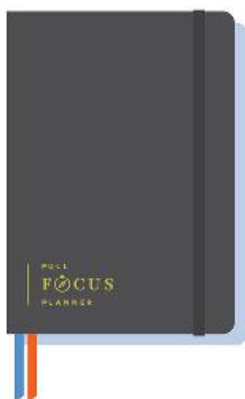
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